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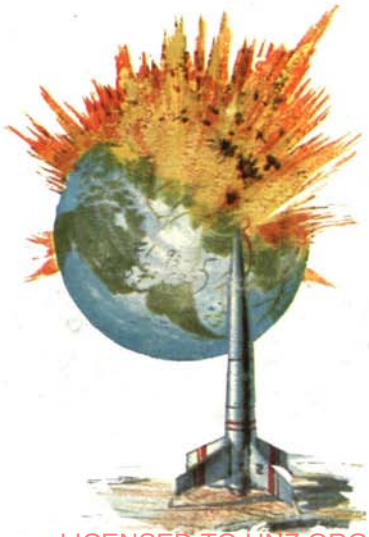

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THE MOST THRILLING

SCIENCE FICTION

EVER TOLD

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THE SPACE HORDE

By CHAD OLIVER

Scientists have been known to state with authority when referring to certain planets or galaxies, that conditions could not support "life as we know it." But that leaves a big opening. What about life beyond our conception?"

LOOK UP, and out, to the stars.

Look along the light-years, across the gulfs of immensity, out through a universe of thinly-starred darkness. Look, if you will, through tubular telescopes with concave mirrors two hundred inches in diameter. Look out into your universe, out and out and out—

You cannot see it all.

For the Earth is dust, dust floating in a black and endless sea. Space is a word, a feeble man-mouthed symbol, and it stands for a sea that mocks the imagination. Space is a sea, a titanic deep, an ocean. Space is no gentle lake, no friendly pond that welcomes the painted toys of children. Space is an ocean of vastness beyond comprehension, an ocean that is—

Alive.

A seething ocean adrift with millions and billions of floating islands, their faces turned toward galaxies of suns that flare and pulse and hurl radiation from many-colored atomic furnaces. A boiling maelstrom acrawl with life, life that slithers and creeps and walks and glides beneath liquids unimaginable.

Oceans are the birthplaces of life, and on the billion shores of this huge mother-sea there is—

Everything.

And out of that sea, out of that dark ocean of life, one day They came, as They had to come. They pushed past man's little outposts and space stations as They would kick aside the strewn toys of children. They came as a hurricane, a ravening cyclone of alien life, thundering across cities as though cities were so many flimsy native huts and science only a primitive magic shrieked into the cutting teeth of the wind.

They came.

They came searching, hun-

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The deadly slime moved irresistibly forward.

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gering, for reasons unguessable.

They came in screaming metal shells and the shells thudded into the Earth like hail. The shells cracked open, eggs bursting with life, and They came out.

And They subdivided.

They multiplied, spread out in bubbling circles, acid on the Earth. They ingested, They consumed—

Everything. Anything.

Insects, lizards, trees, rabbits, men.

They came from the mother-sea, from the ocean of dark immensity. They came to the Earth, thirsting, wanting—

And They could not be stopped.

In a farmhouse only sixty miles from Paris, a haggard man took a few minutes too long to decide what he would carry with him. He got his wife and his eight-year-old daughter and they ran for the road under a warm, blind sun.

The sound, the hissing, bubbling sound, was all around them.

The girl began to scream.

There was a terrible scorched smell in the air, a smell of meat left too long on the fire.

The family was cut off.

The man threw down what he had in his arms, heaved it into the undulating, colorless mass. It disappeared. He picked up his daughter, ran back to the house, found a ladder. He helped his wife climb up to the roof, boosted the girl up the ladder, climbed up himself. They went as high as they could go and hung on.

It took a long time. The sun lazed through the arc of afternoon.

The stuff bubbled through the farmyard. A tree fell into it with a dull plop. The tree disappeared.

The house began to tremble, to slide—

They hung on, the man and the woman and the child, not even screaming now.

The house crumbled under them.

They—fell in. . . .

From outside, through the open window, the sound came. It came in waves, rising and falling, like a chant. It was made by fifty thousand human voices.

The sound came from the football stadium.

"Close that blasted window," Adrian Hackett said, grinding out his cigarette against the untidy pile of butts in the ashtray on the

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polished brown table. "That lament for the dead is driving me nuts."

Of the three men in the room, the biologist Owen Landseer was closest to the window. He heaved his stocky frame out of his chair, reached out with his powerful hairy arms, and pulled the double-windows shut with a surprisingly gentle motion.

They could still hear the prayers from the stadium, but the sound was muted now, a faraway wind sighing through nameless trees.

Landseer sat down again, hunching his big shoulders. "Maybe we should join them. My wife is over there now."

Quincy Rice, from the primate lab, snorted. He pulled at his neat, square beard. His voice was surprisingly loud for such a small man. "Nuts," he said succinctly. "We've got a job to do. Let's do it."

Ade Hackett fired up another cigarette, knowing that he was smoking too much, thinking what Donna would say if she knew. Funny to worry about that now. "We're one hell of a long way from being another Manhattan Project," he said. "Of course, there are thousands of other research teams working on this thing, but no one else is hitting it quite from our angle."

"I'd feel better if we *had* an angle," Landseer said gently. "I don't see one yet, but maybe I'm a little on the obtuse side."

"Puns, already," Quincy muttered.

"We've got five days to turn in a preliminary report to the United Nations," Ade said. "The situation is simple. Those things, whatever They are, landed on this planet slightly over a month ago. I guess most of us never really thought that Earth *was* a planet—it was the world, the universe, all there was. We weren't worried about space; we thought we had troubles enough here at home. Result: we're helpless, absolutely helpless. We're all set up to defend ourselves against the wrong enemy."

Outside, the prayers from the football stadium continued. They made a steady background, a surf of sound breaking against the granite rocks of a lonely shore.

Ade felt the tension crawling within him. He hadn't tried to eat any breakfast and he had been sick after lunch. Donna had been in London visiting her mother, and now she couldn't get out. All the transportation facilities were

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tied into a monumental knot. Sure, They weren't in England yet, but the Channel was narrow, so narrow, and They were boiling across rivers in France. . . .

He looked at his cigarette. She had been after him for years to cut down on his smoking.

"The papers and the newscasts are making with the same old junk," he said. "We're making jim-dandy progress, the solution is near at hand, keep calm—all the usual bromides. The fact is that we haven't been able to touch Them at all. We don't even know what They are. Apparently, They can nullify our best weapons with ease. Planes can't get near Them. Missiles with hydrogen warheads just drop in the middle of that stuff and are *digested.* Chemicals have no effect. So far, we haven't even been an irritant. We might as well not be here."

"They've just hit the three places, that right?" Quincy asked, filling his pipe from a red tobacco can.

Ade nodded. "There are three centers. One in France, one in East Africa, one in China near Peiping. If They go on expanding at the present rate, we've got less than two years left to us. Probably not that long—the riots and the epidemics have already started. And there may be other landings. They could be right here in Michigan tomorrow."

The word hung in the smoke-blued air of the room.

Tomorrow.

Owen Landseer involuntarily glanced toward the door.

"They won't use the door, Owen," Quincy said, puffing on his pipe. "They just multiply right through the wall."

"Cut it out," Owen said nervously.

"I talked to General Massinger this morning," Ade said, ignoring the byplay. "They've got that report from the Rand boys."

Quincy raised his eyebrows.

The room was suddenly very still.

"The guys at the Rand Corporation have fed all the data we have into the big computers," Ade told them. "Unless those data were all wet, which is hardly very likely, there's only a very small possibility for error."

"And?" prompted Owen Landseer.

"And the computers figure that man's survival chances are precisely zero," Ade said quietly. "Given the nature of the problem, the kind of

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brains we have to work with, and the amount of time available, *there is no solution.* In plain English, gentlemen, if we ourselves are the best defense Earth has to offer, then man has had it. We're through."

There was a long silence in the little academic room with the polished brown table and hard wooden chairs.

Outside, the chanted prayers rose up from the football stadium and lost themselves in the wind and the sky.

Tanganyika Territory, East Africa.

Highland country, rich grasslands surrounded by towering volcanic mountains. Flat-topped acacia trees, flowers nodding under the sun, warm and pleasant days.

It had been a good place to live.

Mud-roofed huts grouped in a circle, with an outside fence of thorn-brush for protection. Humped cattle, some with long, graceful horns, some with stubby horns. A smell of milk and cattle and native beer—

And a smell of terror.

They have come: out of the sky, across the lakes and fields.

A sound: hissing, seething, bubbling.

The village is empty now, the people are gone.

They move in, taking. Their time. Eating, digesting, destroying. There is no hurry. Grass, frantic cattle, sheep, a few donkeys, and then the fragile huts themselves. . . .

At the doorway of one of the huts, framed by the darkness within, a small boy, rubbing his sleepy eyes. Left behind somehow, forgotten in the haste and the confusion and the fear.

He looks, listens.

He cries out a word, a child's word, an uncomprehending word. He calls to his family, his clan, the world he has known. They have never failed him before. He expects gentle arms, warmth, reassurance.

There is nothing.

The boy begins to run, crying, his eyes wide.

He steps into the bubbling, hissing mass.

He has no foot.

He pitches forward, and he is gone. His screams continue for an impossibly long time.

Only the sky is clean, for They have taken the land.

High in the branches of a tropical forest, half-hidden in pools of shadow, an animal nibbles at a wild fruit with sharp white teeth. It is a small

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animal, no larger than a rabbit. It has bright, alert eyes and its coat is soft and brown. It cocks its head as though listening, but there is no sound. Then it moves gracefully along the high branches from one tree to another. Half a mile away, invisible in the cool green shadows, another animal licks out his long red tongue, catches an insect, and waits.

Ade Hackett shifted his position on the hard chair and chewed on a menthol cough drop to get the stale taste of smoke out of his mouth. He wasn't sleepy, and in fact he knew that he would be unable to sleep without a pill when he finally did get to bed, but he was in that flat state of exhaustion where a man just keeps going on nervous energy. His bloodshot eyes burned in his skull.

Ade was a paleontologist, and a good one, but he seldom thought of himself that way. No man, to himself, is merely a paleontologist or psychologist or butcher or mechanic or writer. A man is many things: a scientist, perhaps, but also a guy who likes to get drunk once in a while, make love, tell jokes, go fishing. Ade was a tall, skinny man with a tough, weather-beaten face and blue eyes that had twinkled in happier days. He was no lover of crowds, and there were those who considered him unfriendly. He was most content when he could get outside in the lonesome western canyons, feel the sun on his back. He loved to sleep under the warm stars where he could hear the frogs croaking along the banks of a mist-cloaked river.

Sometimes, Ade figured that paleontology was more an excuse than anything else. Fossil-hunting was like fishing: it gave a man a reason to get off by himself, get off where he could smell the trees and the grass and the sand and the woodsmoke, get off where he could be a man again, and be happy.

If it hadn't been for Donna, he would have been tempted to go off somewhere and enjoy himself. If the world had to end, it would be better to face it in the clean air under a blue sky. A conference room was no place to shake hands with death.

He would have been tempted, but he wouldn't have gone. There were times when a man just didn't run away.

"Okay," he said. "Our job is to turn in a preliminary report. We don't have to *prove* anything. We don't even have

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to think that our idea is very likely. We're up the creek without a paddle, and we have to do the best we can."

Owen Landseer nodded, his heavy features haggard with strain. "We're faced with a problem we can't solve," he said. "And if we can't solve it—"

"Check," Ade agreed. "Our business boils down to one simple question. *Are we absolutely certain that man is the highest life-form on this planet?* All of us are supposed to be experts on the process of evolution. Has evolution stopped with man—or is there something else?"

"You mean we're looking for a kind of superman?" Quincy Rice nudged his beard with his red tobacco can. "Nothing to it. All we need is the Abominable Snowman. We track him down, clap him on the shoulder, and say, 'Well, Abominable, old bean, how about lending us a hand?' Then Abominable giggles abominably, shoves us off a cliff, and we're right back where we started."

Ade laughed. He hadn't laughed in a long time. "Afraid our job is a bit more fundamental, Quincy," he said. "There are other research teams exploring the possibility of *Homo superior*. No, we're looking for something else." He paused, fingering the cellophane wrapper from the cough drop box. "You know, we chatter a lot about mutations and advances and one thing and another, and yet we always seem to assume that the next step up in evolution is going to be a development of *man*. But isn't that really contrary to everything we know about past evolution?"

Owen Landseer frowned. "I see what you're getting at. The first amphibians came from the lobe-finned fish, which weren't very advanced fishes. The first mammals came from a very primitive reptile group, before the dinosaurs or the snakes had even evolved."

"In other words," Quincy said, leaning forward, "what comes after the *mammals?*"

"Exactly." Ade lit another cigarette, excited now despite his weariness. "If you look back over the fossil record, there's one very interesting fact. The first fish came from the Silurian period of the Paleozoic, around 390 million years ago. The first amphibians came later in the Paleozoic, and so did the first reptiles. About 190 million years ago you get into the

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Mesozoic, the so-called Age of Reptiles, but in terms of evolution the Mesozoic is mainly important because it gave rise to the first mammals and the first birds, both of them offshoots from the reptiles. And then the last great era, the Cenozoic, got underway around 55 million years ago. We're still in the Cenozoic. And, gentlemen, what new vertebrate class has evolved in our Cenozoic?"

"Zero," said Quincy Rice, lighting his pipe with a wooden stick match and then carefully breaking the match before he tossed it into the wastebasket.

"Zero," Ade agreed. "In the whole Cenozoic we don't get a single new *kind* of animal. Sure, we get the Primates, winding up with men, but the primates are just one special type of mammal. What's happened? Is there some unknown animal hiding in the brush today, just as the first mammals scurried under the feet of the dinosaurs? *What comes after the mammals?*"

"Maybe nothing does," Quincy suggested.

"Do *you* believe that?" Ade asked.

"No," Quincy admitted cheerfully, puffing on his pipe.

"There's one point, though," Owen Landseer said. "It could be that physical evolution has more or less been by-passed. Julian Huxley and others have shown that you get a basically different kind of evolution in man. His culture, his way of life, changes without a corresponding change in physical type. An ant society can only change genetically because the ant lifeway is essentially instinctive, but man *learns* his way of life by means of language. There haven't been any fundamental changes in human physical structure for at least fifty thousand years, but our culture has changed plenty."

"I'll buy that," Ade said, "but it only applies to man. We still haven't obliterated other forms of life on this planet—how much effect have we had, say, on some of the wilder parts of the Amazon jungles?"

"But look here," Quincy objected. "You're asking us to perform an impossible task. How can we imagine a radically different form of life? How can we speculate about an animal as far above us as we are above the lizards? I can't see how we would have much better luck than a bright ape back in the Miocene would have in trying to dream up New York City.

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We're limited by our own mental processes, after all; that's why fictional supermen are super*men*, nothing but magnified human beings."

Ade lit another cigarette, inhaled, and almost at once ground it out in the overflowing ashtray. "You're forgetting something, Quincy. We have one important advantage over that bright ape of yours. We've got a tool to work with: the scientific method. We know something about the processes of evolution, and we've got the record of past evolutionary development to work from. There *are* some consistent trends in evolution: in patterns of reproduction, in the efficiency of energy utilization, in the growth of certain parts of the brain, in the circulatory systems, in the placement of the limbs. If there *is* something on this planet higher than the mammals, I think we might be able to make some pretty good guesses about it. I think we've got all the information we need, locked up inside our own three skulls. All we have to do is drag it out and look at it."

"If the animal exists at all," Quincy said.

"It had better exist," Ade said grimly.

It was raining in Peiping: a dull gray rain that fell endlessly from a leaden sky.

Lapping at the city like a nightmare swamp, They bubbled and heaved over what had been roads and collective farms, fields of grain and cotton, barnyards alive with pigs and poultry. The rain fell into Them with sodden splashes, and was gone.

There had been some two million people in Peiping. Almost a million of them were still there, milling through the streets.

They came. They hissed and bubbled. They nibbled at the edges of the new housing developments, sucked at the old courtyard homes, licked at the streaming streets.

On an old brick wall, a smiling portrait of Chairman Mao.

They ate at the wall, slowly, brick by brick.

A dumpy short-haired woman in a quilted blue uniform watches them, her dark eyes wild.

She screams.

She runs at the wall, claws at Them, fills her hands with the elastic, colorless bubbles—desperate movements . . .

She looks at the stumps of her arms.

She falls forward, her eyes wide open.

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She is a lump, and then nothing.

A terrible, burning stench fills the wet air, until even the rain is a stinking, evil thing, falling, falling. . . .

The trees stand on strong bark-covered legs and far above the jungle floor they spread out the green umbrellas of their branches to make a roof for the world.

In those trees, two animals, side by side.

They smile, sharing each other. Oh, yes, they can smile —smile with lips and eyes and minds. You might see them from below, brown coats blending into the bark of the trees. You might think they were monkeys or even squirrels, for you would not see them well.

You might even take a shot at them, but you will miss.

They sit there quietly, smiling, looking down.

Thinking?

Perhaps.

You might call it that.

Ade Hackett hung up the telephone in the hall and walked slowly down the corridor past the deserted classrooms. He went back into the little conference room, fighting a blind sense of panic.

"They've landed in Ohio," he said.

"Where?" asked Owen Landseer.

"Near Akron."

"And?" said Quincy, cleaning his pipe.

"We've thrown everything at Them up to and including the kitchen sink. Nothing. So many spitballs. We're evacuating the area."

"And then what?" Quincy asked.

Ade shrugged. "You evacuate areas until there aren't any more areas to evacuate. Then you sit and take it."

"They'll be here in Michigan soon," Quincy said.

Outside, they could hear the swell of voices from the football stadium.

"Let's get with it," Ade said. "Owen, you keep notes, will you? You're the only one with a decent handwriting. Now, what have we got?"

They went to work. It was nothing very impressive, Ade thought. No fancy lights and big computers. No hysterics. No shouts of "Eureka!" Just three guys sitting in a room, trying to do the toughest job—

Trying to think.

There was one thing that made it easier. Obviously, if the animal existed at all, and if he was capable of action against the things, he didn't know of Their existence;

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They had encountered no opposition. Therefore, the animal didn't live in Africa, France, China, or the United States. When you subtracted those, there were only a few possible places where such an animal might be found: the polar regions, the wilder areas of South America, some scattered islands.

Think, damn you, think!

Well, what would the animal look like?

It would be an offshoot from the mammals, obviously. But it would not be a development from the most complex and specialized of living mammals; evolution *always* builds on simple, generalized forms. It wouldn't *look* very spectacular. The first rat-like mammals hadn't been very impressive, and the *very* early mammals, the transitional forms such as Cynognathus, hadn't even looked like mammals at all.

See him?

Small, furry, inconspicuous. . . .

It would have a good brain. The dumbest mammal looked like Einstein if you compared him to a fish or a frog or a dinosaur. But the animal wouldn't just be smart as a man is smart. It would *use* its brain differently. Man found the capacity to symbolize, and thus to create a language. The next step would be to eliminate the *necessity* for language. . . .

A silent animal, to our ears.

Man's brain can grope its way ahead, step by step, and communicate its findings to others by language. It can proceed logically by trial and error, it can build on past results.

Next?

A new brain, a different brain. See it? It is a short-cut brain. It sees relationships, quickly and accurately, and it sees them *intuitively*. No need to pack around a warehouse full of facts. It perceives answers at will *when and if it needs them*. They are simply there, as a man sees a club in a fallen branch. And if two beings always evaluate situations in the same way, if they really *understand* each other, what is there to communicate?

And if a brain knows its own power. . . .

Babies?

There would be few births. Twins would be unknown. The female would have a very long pregnancy. An individual would be born almost fully mature, eliminating the long period of youthful helplessness.

See him?

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He looks like a simple mammal. He would have evolved from a generalized animal—

Like an opossum.

Like a tree shrew.

He lives in tropical country, where the trees are thick. In the Old World, probably. An island, perhaps—

Like Madagascar?

The three of them, Ade and Owen and Quincy, turned in their report to the United Nations.

A long shot?

Certainly.

What else can you do when your back is against the wall, the blindfold over your eyes, the rifles of the firing squad lifting in the sunlight?

Outside, the prayers continued.

They kept coming.

They seeped across the fields under cloudless blue skies, They poured into towns and cities beneath a silver moon and frosted stars.

They kept coming.

Man could not stop Them.

But man was searching—

High in the trees that thrust their green arms toward the sun, lost in jungle-shadows, the two animals sit on a branch. They are silent, enjoying the cool shade.

They turn, looking, before the sounds come.

Men, hacking their way across the jungle floor.

Men.

Funny men! Oh, they know men. They see men even in the jungle depths. They listen to the hums and buzzes in men's minds.

Men are comical.

Men are the biggest and the smallest animals in the jungle.

They think they rule the world.

The young like men. They look and listen and laugh. Sometimes you had to join them. Men *are* funny! Yes, they are cute. You have to give them that. . . .

New thoughts.

New hums and buzzes.

The two animals sit more erectly, more alertly.

They close their eyes to see better—

Help.

If we could only find them, if only they exist.

Where could they be?

What can we say to them?

Death. Destruction. A jelly-sea rising on the Earth. Eggs from the stars, eggs that hatch into living bubbles that eat into the very land you walk on. Bubbles. Devouring, ingesting, hissing—

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Oh, God, Mary was in France. . . .

Not here yet. Looks so peaceful. Wish I had a drink of water. Feet are tired. They'll be here, they'll be everywhere.

Crazy animal. Dream animal! Doesn't exist!

Wild goose chase.

What time is it?

Help!

Assistance!

Where are you?

No use—

Oh, God, Mary was in France. . . .

Feet hurt.

Where are you? Where . . .

Men.

Funny men!

Men are always worried.

Comical.

The two animals move higher into the trees, seeking concealment. They blend into the bark of the branches. They sit quietly.

They care little for men, though men *are* cute.

But they love their land, their winds and flowers, their long nights and lazy afternoons.

Those images.

Those things from the star-sea.

Alien.

Hostile.

Dangerous?

They had better be stopped. They should not be allowed to come further.

The two animals walk along the high branches toward the center of the island. Other animals converge on the place, taking their time, enjoying their world. The sun is warm, the earth below them fresh and moist.

There are many of them. There have never been so many in the circle before. They fill the trees. They do not touch. They do not speak.

Their eyes are closed.

Concentrate.

Frequencies?

Project.

While it is still daylight there is nothing to see. A faint vibration in the air, perhaps. Heat waves. A tension. Electricity. Other animals are nervous, uncertain. Somewhere, a dog howls.

Then twilight.

Night.

See it?

A crackling electric blue. It is not bright but it hurts the eyes to look upon it. A sheet of vibrating blue fire. A field, an aura. It hovers over the island, taut, shimmering.

It pushes out, seeking, searching—

Finding.

Hurting!

Burning!

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Fire, searing at alien nervous systems.

Concentrate!

Simple.

Men are so funny.

Always making a big thing out of nothing. Of course, they can't understand, not really.

They *are* comical!

Men.

But they are cute.

You have to give them that. . . .

The change came with startling abruptness.

The hissing torrent of alien life had washed over the Earth like a tidal wave from an infinite sea, smashing all before it. They had come, and They had expanded, grown, multiplied. They had been a monstrous cancer eating at the life of a planet, and They had seemed invincible.

And then They—stopped.

Suddenly.

Completely.

Some said that the electric blue haze visible in the night sky had something to do with it. Some said that it was the will of God. Some advanced learned explanations concerning metabolic exhaustion and chemical poisoning.

No one knew.

But They stopped.

The crowding pressure ceased. The edges of that colorless mass of jelly began to shrivel. They did not die, whatever They were. They simply contracted, flowing back, leaving a lifeless husk behind. They retreated, recombined, snaked back along invisible biochemical threads toward the original centers of radiation.

They flowed back through the inert crust—

And there was a heaving, a trembling, a volcanic upheaval deep in the Earth. The sunken metal shells screamed up through the lifeless muck, dripped into the sky, flashed back—

Back through the blue skies and white clouds, back into the dark ocean of life that had spawned Them. Back to the billion-shored mother-sea, back to the ocean of stars.

Behind Them, They left vast sheets of colorless, crusted matter: strange new glaciers to gleam and melt beneath a golden sun. And They left other things behind Them—

A memory.

A fear.

A promise.

A vault of night, dusted with diamond stars: a night that would never again be soft and comforting, a night that had become a window

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opening on a seething maelstrom of life, life that slithers and creeps and walks and glides beneath liquids unimaginable. . . .

And a naked, terrible sky.

But the land-choking crusts shriveled and blackened and disintegrated. The rains came, and the husk became a scum that fertilized the soil.

Plants began to grow, and green grass.

And men came back to their lands.

Ade Hackett sprawled comfortably in his favorite easy chair, his sleeves rolled up over his tanned arms, his feet propped indecorously on the glass-topped coffee table. He could hear Donna whistling an off-key tune in the kitchen as she brewed her magic on the stove. Around him he sensed the security of his home: the paintings, the books, the sectioned fly rod, the pleasant clutter.

He jiggled the ice in his Scotch, sipped it, felt the smoky liquid warm him all the way down.

"When I was a kid," he said, "we used to boil grasshoppers, just for the hell of it. Drop them into a tin-can full of hot water and watch them turn pink. I don't like to think about that now."

Quincy Rice, sitting cross-legged on the floor, puffed at his pipe. "How about me? I work in a primate lab, Ade. We experiment with chimpanzees when we can get them. Sometimes we test new medicines on them. Sometimes they die."

"Funny, isn't it," Ade asked, "when the shoe is on the other foot?"

"We don't *know* that."

"Don't we?"

"I read a piece in the *Times* this morning. Seems the alien life-forms just got indigestion from old Mother Earth. Statistics and everything. Very scientific."

"And the blue lights?"

"Atmospheric phenomena my boy. Five leading astronomers have *proved*. . . ."

Ade put down his empty glass, clasped his hands behind his head. "Quincy, I think we saved the world, or a good part of it."

"You'll never prove that."

"We may not have to."

Quincy stroked his beard. "Meaning?"

Ade uncoiled himself, sat forward. "What if we were right? What if that animal of ours really exists? What if we *did* make contact with it? Where does that leave us?"

Quincy grinned. "Behind the well-known eight ball."

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"Exactly. Quincy, *we're* the dinosaurs now—or at least the apes. We don't know anything about those hypothetical animals of ours, but we know what they can *do*. They may not stay put on that island forever. I don't think they're hostile toward men, or we would have heard from them before. But they're just beginning. They may want some more room before long."

"And then?"

Ade shrugged. "Depends on what they think of us. Look, we don't hate apes, do we? Of course not. We like them. We think apes are pretty sharp. But the apes are headed for extinction, just the same."

"Be kind to your web-footed friends," Quincy said.

Ade laughed, reached for a cigarette. "It's out of our hands, of course. And it won't happen in our time. It might even be that we could be useful to them, somehow. Just the same, Quincy, I kind of like men. I happen to be one. I don't think we're through yet."

Quincy killed the rest of his Scotch. "It did come at an interesting time, didn't it?"

Ade nodded. "Whenever man gets himself into a hole, his culture gives him something so he can dig himself out again. I've heard a lot of prayers lately, and maybe we ought to offer some thanks for technology. We're on the verge of going out into space.

"We're going to need those spaceships, Quincy. Yes, those ships will give us time. We may lose the Earth, but the universe is a big place. I have a hunch that man hasn't reached the end of his road yet, not by a long shot. And next time we run into Them, we'll be ready."

"I hope you're right."

Ade got to his feet.

In his mind, he saw an animal. Furry, inconspicuous.

"I wonder what he thinks of us," he said quietly.

High in the jungle trees where the clean sunlight falls in mottled pools, an animal sits alone and not alone. It nibbles at a wild fruit with sharp white teeth.

It is a small animal, no larger than a rabbit. It has bright, alert eyes and its coat is soft and brown. It cocks its head as though listening.

A man, walking across the jungle floor far below.

Funny man!

The animal smiles, sharing a secret joke.

Men *are* comical!

Men are cute.

You have to give them that.

THE END

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What sort of a world could possibly evolve wherein a man—moved by love and patriotism—eagerly delivers his loved one into the hands of ——

THE BREEDER

By P. F. COSTELLO

McKELDON reached Gatlinburg before dark.

The team of horses, tired and lathered despite the brisk autumn weather, drew up before the inn, their harness creaking. McKeldon got down from the wagon slowly, carefully, as if his bones were brittle as china. He was bone-weary, but he immediately saw to the unloading of the big, coffin-shaped box which he'd driven up from the ruins of Knoxsville.

"It for Jessup?" one of the men at the inn asked as the box was removed from the wagon and brought inside.

"That's right," McKeldon said warily. "Make something of it?"

"Don't get me wrong, now, mister," the man said.

McKeldon followed them into the inn, entranced by the smell of hot, bubbling stew. It never ceased to amaze him that five years before he'd been a chemical engineer over at Oak Ridge. He wondered if there were enough men left anywhere, or a big enough community, or a sufficient interest in chemicals, to need a single member of his profession. Knoxville, he knew, was in ruins. He'd visited the outskirts of Memphis once, but the city was still radioactive. Nashville, the same. The grim story was the same, as far as he knew, all over the world.

"Jessup expecting it?" the man who had asked about the package said.

"Now how could that be?" McKeldon snapped.

"No offense, mister. Just

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asking." He was a big man with a week's growth of beard on his face and hard, determined eyes which McKeldon did not like.

McKeldon shrugged. There was going to be trouble. Obviously. He was ready for trouble. Horses, he thought. It never ceased to amaze him. A chemical engineer in the single great technological civilization—and possibly the last civilization—that mankind had ever produced. Driving a horse-drawn wagon up to the foothills of the Great Smokey Mountains. Horses, and a coffin with a hole-peppered lid.

McKeldon sat down to a bowl of steaming, savory stew.

"Seen any of 'em?" the woman who served him asked.

"Long way off, I spotted a few," McKeldon answered her. "Halfway from Knoxville. They didn't spot me."

The woman, who looked as hard as the oak-plank table, leaned down to ask: "You sure? You sure, man?"

"I think so," McKeldon said. "I can't be positive."

"You *think* so?" the woman repeated his words. It suddenly was very quiet in the inn. McKeldon heard a booted foot shuffle on the wooden floor, heard a single sharp intake of breath. Then, slowly, the dozen men in the common room of the inn moved around his table.

"That's right," McKeldon said levelly. "I think so. I can't be sure. But I had to bring my package through. You all know that."

It was dark outside now. The wind howled down from the mountains and down Gatlinburg's single main street, past the deserted hotels and restaurants and one-time tourist attractions and down all the way to the inn, where Gatlinburg's total population was gathered.

"You should of been sure," the old woman persisted. "You had no right coming here if you wasn't sure. Package or no package."

"Jessup is what counts," McKeldon said. "Jessup and what I've got for him. In the morning, can someone lead me up to where Jessup's hiding?"

Two or three of the men nodded. Apparently that would be no problem.

"If they seen you—" the woman persisted.

McKeldon shook his head. He was too tired to argue. He wanted no more of it. "I'm going upstairs," he said. He

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If the coffin did not pass, the lives of those yet unborn would be in peril.

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looked across the room at his box.

"You have a storeroom somewhere?" he asked. "With a key I can use?"

"What's the matter with your own room?" the woman asked.

"All right, maybe that's better. Have them bring it up there."

There was a shuffling of feet. No one moved. "Can't we take just one little look?" the big man who had first asked McKeldon about the package demanded.

"No," McKeldon said.

"All we want is one little—"

"Take it upstairs," McKeldon said.

"You got your—"

Nerve, the man was probably going to say, McKeldon thought as he jumped swiftly to his feet and grabbed the man's tattered shirt front, pulling the rough, bearded face close to his own. "We're supposed to be civilized men," McKeldon said. "This is the way it's got to be. You think different?" With his free hand McKeldon drew a long bone-handled hunting knife. Despite the situation, he had to fight down a smile. Hunting knife, he thought, with the ruins of Knoxville full of firearms. Still, firearms were forbidden. Fire was a necessity, yes—but not firearms. *They* might be attracted by the sound. *They* might come. And there were pitifully few human settlements left. If they heard, they would come not in tens or hundreds or thousands, but in millions, as they always came.

McKeldon pushed the man roughly away from him, and watched as he fell heavily against a chair and went over, the chair coming down on top of him. "Rigney's the name," the man said, getting up and wiping the blood from his mouth. "When you deliver that package to Jessup, you look me up, mister. I'll be waiting."

"If that's what you want," McKeldon said.

Four of them took the package upstairs for him. He thanked them and locked himself inside the small bedroom with it, taking off no more than his boots to lie down on the wonderful bed. He stretched every muscle of his body in a moment of pure animal contentment and drifted slowly toward sleep, the thoughts spinning in kaleidoscopic confusion through his brain.

He had been at Oak Ridge during the catastrophe. Oak

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Ridge had in part been responsible for it, but had escaped the severest damage. H bomb, he thought. Chemical engineers have something to do with H bombs, too. So you're one small part guilty, McKeldon. Not that your profession matters. We all share in the guilt. All of us. We all share in the destruction.

There were, most estimates said, less than half a million human beings left on Earth. Runaway H bomb, he dreamed on in the last semi-lucid moments before sleep claimed him. Runaway H bomb starting a chain reaction in the atmosphere, in the waters of Earth, destroying the work of generations in a moment and sterilizing virtually all those remaining. And worse, mutating the ants. . . .

He dreamed of an ant the size of a fox terrier. It was a nightmare, but it was real enough. Five years; five generations of ants, with more and more mutations. Salamander-sized ants and house-cat-sized ants, and now ants as big as fox terriers. Seeking the few men who were left, because they somehow, instinctively, recognized man as the enemy, the one enemy who could stop them. Of course, man could not multiply the way the ant could, especially since the Disaster. Man was outnumbered, millions to one, and but for such as McKeldon's package, would be doomed to extinction. . . .

McKeldon awoke, instantly wary. Five years had taught him that. He was a product of civilization in a world which had seen the end of civilization. He did not awake slowly. He never awoke slowly. To awake slowly was to die. He came awake with every muscle in his body ready to respond to his command.

He was not alone in the room. The fact that he had locked the door from the inside meant nothing. There could be other keys, others to use them. . . .

The shadow moved swiftly.

McKeldon barely had time to hunch forward and raise his forearm as a shield. Something struck, there was a muttered oath, and McKeldon felt the scalding wetness and the pain as his arm went limp. He rolled from the bed as the shadow lunged again. Then he got up swiftly, lifting his heavy boot and swinging it. The shadow cried out. McKeldon dropped the boot and clutched at what was on the bed. They went down on the

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floor together. The knife clattered away. In the darkness, McKeldon got his right arm around a bearded throat, and began to throttle it. His injured left arm was numb.

A heel lashed out wildly, awkwardly, and caught McKeldon's kneecap. He winced with the pain but did not release his throttlehold. On the outskirts of Knoxville he had killed a man to protect what he brought up into the wild Smokey Mountains for Jamie Jessup. He could kill again if he had to. Jessup and what he brought to Jessup — these were all that mattered.

The fight was slowly going out of McKeldon's assailant. Finally, he slumped and went limp, so McKeldon released the throttle hold.

Instantly the shadow became spring steel. A ruse, McKeldon thought, not allowing himself the luxury of an oath. He found himself fighting tooth and nail again in desperate silence. He could have called out for help but decided against it. Too many of the men at the inn might line up with his assailant if it came to a showdown.

McKeldon was forced back against the bed, and pinned there. A fist like a sledge hammer slammed three times against his face, and his senses swam. He writhed and lashed out with his own right hand, feeling jarring contact with bone. He struck out again, and scrambled to his feet, then his knees. The shadow came upright also, and they closed.

One hand was all McKeldon could use. He thought of what was in the box, thought of Jessup waiting up there in the mountains. He swung his right fist and swung it again and went on swinging until the breath rasped through his throat and he could barely stand upright, until he realized he was swinging at nothing. . . .

With shaking hands McKeldon lit his kerosene lamp. There were no generators for electricity, of course.

He bent over the unconscious man and stared at his bloody, swollen face. He had seen the face before, earlier this evening, downstairs in the inn's common room. But it was not Rigney. A wave of disappointment engulfed him, because he knew Rigney too would be trouble, sooner or later. He was hoping this man would be Rigney, to have done with it.

McKeldon examined the box, which had not been molested. Then he dragged

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the unconscious man from the room, locked the door from the outside, and carried him downstairs. He lit a lamp and waited. Soon the old woman, wrapped in a coarse robe, came.

"Yes?" she demanded. "What happened?"

McKeldon jerked his head toward the man, whom he'd stretched out on the floor before the dying fire. "Busted into my room," he said.

"I'm sorry," the woman said.

'What about Rigney?" McKeldon asked her. While speaking, he pulled a curtain sash from the window and bound the unconscious man hand and foot. Then the woman saw the blood on his arm and without a word brought a pot of water from the fire and began to clean it. When she had bandaged his arm and fashioned a sling for it, she said in a quiet voice:

"That's my name too. Rigney."

"But—"

"The man Rigney is my son. So what about him?"

"I'll fight with my life to bring this box through to Jessup. You know that. You all ought to be willing to do the same. What about your son?"

"I—"

"What about him?"

The woman looked at the fire. Then, her face still hard as rock, she began to cry. She made a noise in her throat and it was so much like an animal sound that it startled McKeldon. Then she said: "He ain't here!"

McKeldon said: "You think he's waiting for me on the trail somewhere?"

The woman shrugged, wiping the tears from her dirt-streaked face. "He's excited over what you got," she said. "Who wouldn't be?"

McKeldon let that pass. "If he tries anything I'll kill him."

"Maybe he just ran away because he didn't want to face what—what you got. What he can't have. Yeah, that's probably what he did."

"You think so?"

The woman shook her head slowly. "Not hardly. Please, mister. He don't mean no harm. Please, mister. If he comes after you, don't kill him. Please."

McKeldon didn't answer. Instead he asked: "Who's going to guide me up to Jessup's place."

The woman said: "I will."

"I don't know if I'd like that."

"Well, I will anyhow. You

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can take me or leave me. But you won't get anyone else."

"What about him?" McKeldon said, indicating with a jerk of his thumb the bound man who was just now regaining consciousness.

"Jake Vardig? You don't have to worry none about Jake. When he's whupped the fight goes out of him quick enough."

"Long trip to Jessup's place?"

"Sunup to sundown."

"We'll leave at sunup," McKeldon said.

"I kind of figured we would."

"What if we meet your boy on the road, Mrs. Rigney?"

She didn't answer him. Finally he had to say: "Well?"

"I'm sorry. It's just that—no one's called me that in a long time. Seems just ages. Mrs. Rigney."

"Well, what about it?"

"That's why I'm going, mister. If he sees me along, maybe he won't try nothing."

"Let's get some sleep," McKeldon said.

"I reckon."

McKeldon went upstairs to his room, opened the door, then locked it behind him. He lay on the bed with his hands across his chest, the wounded left arm feeling numb and painful. He did not sleep at all.

Mrs. Rigney had the team ready for him in the morning, harnessed and fed. Frost stiffened the ground with white, McKeldon's breath came in a long white plume, and the horses stamped their legs for warmth.

"Got some coffee for you," Mrs. Rigney said.

"Thank you," McKeldon said.

While he drank she told him, "I don't know much who you are or where you come from, mister. But I figure the way you do: what you're doing is important. It's the most important thing."

"Thank you," McKeldon said again, finishing the coffee.

"What I'm trying to say, I reckon I'd take my place by your side and fight, if I had to."

McKeldon nodded. There was nothing to say. He watched while four men brought the big box outside and placed it in the wagon. Their hands were trembling — perhaps with the cold.

"Seen my boy?" Mrs. Rigney demanded.

"Nope," one of them said promptly. The others nodded. McKeldon climbed in front of

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the rig, and Mrs. Rigney swung up alongside.

"How's the arm?"

"Numb."

"You want me to drive?"

"I can handle them."

McKeldon lifted the reins and brought them down. "Get going!" he said. The horses plodded slowly across the frost covered ground toward the entrance to what had been a National Park, when there was a nation. The ground climbed steeply, and would climb all day.

"Highest mountain around here's Clingman's Dome," Mrs. Rigney said. "Used to have a parking area for cars flattened off near the top. Few hundred feet from there, a rest house. Jessup lives up there."

"All right," McKeldon said.

"About twenty miles. Most all of it up hill."

"All right," McKeldon said again.

"Say, what's eating you?"

"Nothing," McKeldon said. Nothing, he thought bitterly. It was everything. It was the whole world to him. But of course he couldn't use his fists to fight it, as the man last night had, as Mrs. Rigney's son might do today. . . .

Rigney hailed the wagon before noon. He stood silhouetted in the cold sunlight on a high rock overlooking the road. In his hand and glinting with sunlight was a long-barreled rifle.

"Drop the reins," he said. "Get down off of there."

"You can't use a gun," Mrs. Rigney said. "You know you can't. Use a gun, you take all our lives into your hands. They know the sound. They come looking."

"Get down from there, mister. Get down, ma. You shouldn't have come."

"Go back to town, son."

But they had climbed down from the wagon.

"Stand still, next to him. That's right, ma. Don't either one of you move."

Rigney got down from the rock and came nimbly across the road toward them, despite the fact that he was a big man, as big as McKeldon himself. He had eyes only for what was in the wagon.

"Now back away from there slowly," he said.

McKeldon backed away, but Mrs. Rigney stood her ground. "Shoot me, son," she said. "You'll have to shoot me."

"Now ma—"

McKeldon wondered if she were doing it for him. Rigney's eyes swung from the

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wagon to his mother and back. For the moment he had all but forgotten McKeldon, who went slowly around to the other side of the wagon.

"For the last time, ma."

"Don't shout, I can hear you. You'll have to shoot me, Tom. Your own mother."

"Just get back."

"You won't get away with it. Some of our men are in the hills already."

"To guard Jessup's place!" Rigney spat. "What's so all-fired important about him, anyhow?"

"You know what."

"Get back, ma. For the last time."

The rifle swung up. Unflinching, the woman stood her ground. The man was very close to her now. Three strides away. Three strides from the wagon.

McKeldon came silently, desperately, around the wagon. He stooped, found a stone the size of his fist. Then he charged out at Rigney. The rifle went off, echoing through the hills. McKeldon swung the stone savagely and felt it hit hardness and then softness at the side of Rigney's head. The rifle leaped from the man's hands as he fell heavily to the ground. McKeldon looked down at him and felt pity welling up in his breast, not for Rigney, who was dead and had died instantly from a smashed skull, but for the woman.

She took the rifle and handed it to McKeldon. "You might need this," she said.

"I wouldn't use it. Noise of it brings the ants out of the ground. You know that."

"He should have known it too. He's dead, isn't he?"

The woman had not looked at her son since he'd fallen.

"Yes," McKeldon said. "He's dead."

The woman nodded. She was not crying. "I think. . . . wait here with him . . . if you don't mind."

"I'm sorry it had to be this way, Mrs. Rigney."

"It wasn't your fault. We all have our job to do. It's why we're here in Gatlinburg. He should have known that. We got to guard Jessup. We got to watch out for the ants. We got to give our lives to protect him, if necessary, and what he's doing."

"We've got to give—anything we have to," McKeldon said.

He climbed back into the rig. Mrs. Rigney sat down to wait by her son's dead body. "You follow the main road up to a fork. Old Park Department sign's still there. Points

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the way to Clingman's Dome. And Jessup. Think you can find it?"

"I'll find it," McKeldon said, and reined the team ahead.

Stiff with cold, he reached the old parking area near the top of Clingman's Dome near twilight. Now in the cold months of the year, the smokey haze which had given these mountains their name was hardly in evidence. Range on range, the mountains fell away, gray-green and majestic, toward the horizon. He tried to picture how it had been, only half a dozen years ago, when the tourists came here by the hundreds of thousands, their cars lining the parking lot, their cameras swinging from shoulders, their faces eager, excited. Maybe someday in the future, in the far future, if the few men like Jessup had the power . . .

He sighed and drove the wagon ahead, up the steep trail above the parking area. Twenty minutes later he spotted the cabin through the trees. He turned a bend in the trail, and a black bear came out from the trees and stared at him appraisingly. He shouted, and the bear lumbered off.

Then he heard a hoarse shout from the cabin.

He leaped down from the wagon and sprinted toward the cabin, pulling his knife as he ran. He reached the door on the dead run and pushed. The door was not locked.

The light was dim inside, and rapidly fading. A man was down on his back, his arms and legs thrashing. An ant as big as the ant in McKeldon's dream, was down on his chest, an ant which must have weighed thirty pounds. The enormous clicking mandibles reached for the felled man's throat as McKeldon leaped.

The body was glossy black, hard, somehow revolting. In disgust, McKeldon hurled it away, then waited, knife ready, for it to attack. Was this what would inherit the Earth from man? He shuddered. He would never know. He could only do his little bit. Only the future generations could answer that question.

The ant scurried across the floor at him. It clung to his leg and he fell over on his back, letting it come. Loathing almost made his hand powerless, but he waited until it had almost reached his throat, then struck with the knife. He struck again and

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again, driving the blade home. The creature's six limbs kicked and wriggled. The mandibles snapped inches from his throat, first furiously, then slower and slower, then finally not at all. Finally, McKeldon pushed the dead thing away from him.

The other man was just getting up. "Thank you," he said, and McKeldon nodded. "He was a loner. There aren't any others, mister."

"You're Jessup?"

"That's me, Jamie Jessup, mister. Much obliged."

McKeldon looked at him. He was a short, stout man. He looked soft. He was dressed sloppily. McKeldon sighed. If he stayed here very long, he probably would not like Jamie Jessup.

"Pretty good life," Jessup said. "Folks in Gatlinburg watch over me, sort of. Bring me food and all. Talk about living off the fat of the land. . . ."

"I don't want to talk about it," McKeldon said shortly.

"Say, wait a minute! Are you McKeldon?"

"That's right."

"Been waiting. I got your letter." Jessup rolled his eyes lewdly. McKeldon wanted to hit him, but did not. Instead he went outside to the wagon.

Carefully, he opened the lid of the coffin-like box. There was a hypodermic needle in a niche under the cover, and he used it on the woman who lay there, inside the box, still as death.

After a while, her eyelids fluttered. "Are we there already?" she said.

"Yes," McKeldon said, his throat muscles working.

"But I hardly feel as if I've been sleeping at all."

She was beautiful, and McKeldon had never seen her looking more beautiful than she did now. "I'll have to be going," he said. "I shouldn't stay here."

"I—I know."

McKeldon had done what he could. Like almost everyone on Earth, he was not capable of reproduction. But mankind had to reproduce—and in a hurry—or perish. Jessup had been left intact by the Disaster. So had the beautiful woman in McKeldon's box.

"I'll come for you in a year," McKeldon said.

"I'll be waiting for you. It's only a year," she said.

"I love you," McKeldon said, climbing back into the wagon.

Then Jessup came down the trail and McKeldon did not even have time to bid his wife good-bye. **THE END**

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THE ELEVENTH PLAGUE

By HENRY SLESAR

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

One man ruled a deserted planet, and five men came to dispossess him. Heavy odds? Not for a magician who knew one more plague than Moses did. . . .

"CHOOSE your men carefully," Deegan said. "Choose five faces you can look at for the next three years. Choose five voices you can listen to. Choose five temperaments you can put up with during those long months. That's my advice, Captain Saylor. And I recommend you use it."

Captain Joel Saylor hid his reaction to his superior officer's speech under a mask of military indifference. He kept his back stiff against the chair, his strong-jawed face implacable. He played the part nicely; he had all the outward characteristics of a seasoned soldier accustomed to taking tough assignments in stride. But he was twenty-three years old; he hadn't spent enough time on Earth to feel assurance about a long duty in space.

"I'm serious," the Colonel said. "I had a similar tour when I was on active space duty. We had an outpost on Io, and I chose the crew myself. I was pretty cocky about it; I picked the best damn high-rated men in the outfit. A real crack crew, Captain. But I didn't pay any attention to temperament, and by the end of the first year, one of my men had killed another, and the rest hated each other so much that the entire project had to be abandoned. So don't worry about service records so much, Captain; pick guys you can live with."

Joel said nothing, and his silence seemed to irritate the old man.

"Something wrong? Think

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I'm making too much of this?"

"No, sir. I was just waiting to hear more about the assignment."

Deegan grunted. "Well, you know the basic story. You and your men have to set up a permanent or semi-permanent station on Planet A15 in the Antara system. You will construct a radio station to provide free contact both with Earth and with ships in the vicinity. You'll provide an emergency landing area for ships in distress, but not a way-station. To do all this, you'll have to spend many months in astronomical observation in order to keep track of all conditions involving space traffic. You will also make observations of a general nature to provide information for Central Space Traffic. And," the Colonel said, with a wry grin, "you'll do any damn thing else we ask you to do. That's the broad idea; there'll be a four-week briefing session for you and your men, as soon as you've determined who they are."

"Will that be all, Colonel?"

"For now, yes. I'd suggest you start collecting service records this afternoon. And take my advice—don't be overly impressed by statistic Get out and meet your me Talk to them, drink wit them, pick fights wit them—"

"There are psychologic ratings, of course," Joel sai trying to be nonchalant.

"Yes, there are those. Deegan frowned, and the sighed. "I've got a feeling I'r talking in vain, Captain. I'v got a hunch that you're goin to make the same mistakes did. But that's your privilege Captain, you're still young. He hoisted eyebrows. "Jus how young are you. Captai Saylor? Thirty?"

Joel swallowed. "Twenty six, sir."

The man at the desk shoo his head.

"Another boy wonder," h said sadly. "This damn Arm never learns. All right, *Captain*—" He put ironic empha sis on the rank—"Choose you men carefully, and get thei requisitions into my office by the end of the month. And I wish you luck."

"Thank you, sir," the Captain said stiffly.

It was a different Joel Saylor who idled in the hammock on the front lawn of Helen Mitchell's house in Roanoke, one long leg dangling over the side. From her living room

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This was Corsini's world and only he would rule it.

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window, Helen looked out and watched the way the sunlight reflected on his blond head, on the light hairs of his bare chest and arms. Her eyes went misty, and the mist made their violet depths lovelier than ever. Then the melancholy mood passed, and she came out of the house carrying a frosted jug.

"That's a beautiful tan you're getting," she said as she approached. "Think the girls on A15 will appreciate it? Or don't they have girls?"

Joel grinned at her. There was no question of his age now; he looked his young years.

"No girls at all on A15. Didn't you know? Only pink elephants with purple spots." He poured himself a tall drink, but its alcohol content didn't sustain his lighthearted mood. "I wish there were pink elephants. Better than nothing at all."

"Is it really that bad?"

"Nobody knows much about it. The scouting party made only a tentative exploration, just enough to determine its habitability, its Earth-type atmosphere and temperature. But we do know that there's no animal life, and only some curious vegetation. It's hardly anything more than a ball of granite with green tufts on it. Not exactly a country club."

Helen touched his shoulder gently.

"My poor Joel. Do you *have* to take the assignment?"

"I don't have to. But it's my first chance for real space service. Everybody says it's a break for me, at my age. I can't afford not to take it."

"A break . . ." the girl said sadly.

"The big question now is the men."

He swung his legs over the side of the hammock and walked barefooted to the table on the edge of the swimming pool. There was a manila envelope lying there; he lifted out the sheet of paper inside, and read it for the tenth time that day.

Lt. Carlos Esquilla, Co-Pilot. Age 24. 4 years interstellar experience. Class rank: 4. Psych. Rating: Excellent.

Lt. Gary Flack, Co-Pilot. Age 25. 4 years interstellar experience. Class rank: 8. Psych. rating: Excellent.

Lt. Nelson Palmer, Navigator. Age 22. 3 years interstellar experience. Class rank: 3. Psych. Rating: Good to Excellent.

Lt. Daniel Fisher, Radioman, Astronomer. Age 23. 4 years interstellar experience.

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Class rank: 1. Psych. Rating: Good.

Sergeant William Bart, General Crewman. Age 25. 5 years interstellar experience. Psych. Rating: Good.

"Are you sure about them?" Helen said softly.

"What?"

"The men you picked. Are you sure you can get along with them? It's a long time to be alone on a strange world . . ."

"You sound like Colonel Deegan," Joel snorted. "They're all top men, excellent service records, good psych. ratings. I know they're okay."

But once more he studied the list, while the girl who wanted to marry him, and who would have to postpone her plans for three long years, watched his troubled face.

Colonel Deegan slid shut the wall chart on the briefing room blackboard, and frowned at the six-man audience confronting him.

"That's the broad picture of the problems you'll find on World A15. But there's one more you'll have to take care of." The grim mouth softened for a moment. "A rather unusual problem, but it shouldn't give you any trouble. You'll have to dispossess someone."

Joel looked perplexed.

"Dispossess? You mean there's somebody *living* there?"

"That's right. Around the year 2043, as some of you may remember, there was a great deal of wildcat merchant ships beachcombing the Antara system, after false rumors about gold and silver had been spread. Some of the ship captains tried to establish property rights on the more hospitable worlds, but the United Space Federation quickly declared their claims illegal. Nobody "owns" the worlds of Antara, or any other star system. However, one of these vessels left a passenger on A15—one version of the story says he was marooned there. He's been there ever since, surviving God knows how. His name is Corsini, and from what I gather from the intelligence reports, he's more than a little mad." Deegan grunted. "After fourteen years of isolation, I guess that's not surprising."

He looked at the men. Their expressions ranged from amused interest on the part of co-pilot Gary Flack, a handsome young man with a cynical mouth, to a dark scowl on the pinched face of Sergeant Will Bart.

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Joel cleared his throat. "What are we supposed to do with him, sir?"

"You're to take him into custody, and put him on the first supply ship that will be arriving on A15 after your base is established—approximately two months from date of landfall. He'll be returned to Earth, and given the proper care and treatment. The assignment shouldn't be difficult. The supposition is that he's made himself a self-styled king of the planet, so he may require some humoring. Deegan permitted himself a twinkle. "Perhaps you can tell him that Earth government wants to give him an official welcome, as ruler of another sovereign power."

Gary Flack laughed aloud. Lt. Palmer, a puckish redhead with a mischievous grin, chuckled. The others remained impassive, except that Sergeant Bart's scowl deepened.

"I don't mean to make light of this problem," Deegan said. "It's important that this mental defective be removed from A15, so he can't cause any difficulty to our operation. There isn't much else we know about him, except that he was a magician on Earth—"

"A magician?" Palmer said. "Sounds like fun. Maybe we ought to keep him around, sir, just for amusement."

"What was the name again?" Joe asked.

"Corsini. Corsini, the Great, of course; that's how he billed himself. You won't have any trouble recognizing him." He smiled. "That takes care of today's session. There'll be a navigational briefing tomorrow morning at 0800. I expect all of you to attend."

There was a party in the rear of the camp recreation hall the night before Captain Joel Saylor and his crew were scheduled for blast-off to their 3-year vigil in space. The party was a tradition. It was the custom to get roaring drunk, blasphemous, brawling; it was expected that there would be wild singing, and rioting, and fist fights; it was supposed to be inevitable that it would climax in what Colonel Deegan delicately referred to as "wenching."

But the party Joel Saylor gave his men never seemed to get started on the proper, or improper, note. Lt. Palmer, the mischievous redhead, was the only one who felt like laughing and drinking heavily and cracking jokes about their forthcoming voyage. The two co-pilots, Esquilla and Flack, tried their best, but

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their gaiety was too interspersed with sudden melancholy moods. Esquilla, a small dark Cuban with an ingratiating smile, spoke of his wife, Marie. Flack, a bachelor, spoke of many women, but without flippancy. Lt. Daniel Fisher, the radioman and astronomer, stared blankly through his thick-lensed glasses, and puckered his broad, high forehead as if occupied with secret thoughts. The sergeant, Will Bart, was the glummest of them all. It was he who finally broke up the party, by grumbling an excuse and going off to bed.

At 0900 the following morning, the crew of the starship *Fermi* gathered under a cold, gray sky. Two hours later, the countdown sounded in the brassy loudspeakers that rimmed the spaceport, and the great ship spit fire and assailed the leaden clouds.

They made landfall three months later.

The briefing sessions had been complete. For weeks, the crew of the *Fermi* had been pre-conditioned to existence on World A15. So thorough, so accurate was their education, that the actual arrival seemed like nothing more than an extension of their training period. Yet not more than an hour after the starship grew quiet in the swirling gray dust of the alien terrain, they realized that all the blackboard statistics had failed to convey the eerie mood of the small, slate-gray world, with its odd, ball-like patches of murky green vegetation, with its insidious warm winds that brought drowsiness at their touch, with its utter silence and incredibly clear sky.

Captain Joel Saylor let them alone for their first twelve hours on the planet, before giving them any commands that would require them to work. It was wisdom on his part. In the two months of the voyage, he had learned that there was no cement to his crew. They weren't a team: they were just five men of military background and space experience. They worked together, because they had to, but they were individuals first. And, as individuals, he felt that they hadn't accepted his authority yet.

It would take time, Joel thought to himself. And time was just what they had.

The next morning, the work began.

It was satisfying work; each men well-trained in his job, busy with familiar, rewarding tasks. The problems

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they would face weren't work problems; Joel knew that. The problems would come when the initial labors were done, when the radio transmitter was in full operation, when living quarters had been constructed, when they had established a livable colony on World A15, and had settled down into the monotonous routine that would vary only little in the next three years.

He was right. Within two months, the major portion of their work had been completed, and there was restlessness among the men. It was then that Joel told them:

"Men, our next assignment should be interesting. Starting tomorrow, we're going to hunt up our friend Corsini."

They reacted pleasantly; the idea of a chase intrigued them.

"We'll make up a searching party that will fly the copter in a circle covering a hundred mile radius. If we don't spot him the first time, we'll make temporary camp at the perimeter of that circle, and cover another hundred miles the next day. We'll keep doing this until we have our man." He rubbed his jaw. "Now we can't all go, of course. Two men will be needed at the ship; one of them to keep the transmitter in operation. So I guess that includes you out, Lt. Fisher."

The radioman's youthful face didn't seem disturbed.

"Doesn't matter to me, sir. Just as soon stay with my equipment."

"Good. Then that leaves only one other man to eliminate. We'll determine that by a drawing."

He marked five strips of paper and folded them into his helmet. Then he passed the hat among them.

"The man with the X doesn't go," Joel said.

"I got it," Palmer said cheerfully, tossing away the wadded paper. "And I guess you got me, genius."

Fisher blushed. "Glad to have you."

"We'll take off at daybreak. Sergeant Bart, you get the copter ready, and load it with enough supplies to sustain us for a four-day expedition."

"Yes, sir."

"And I want every man in full field pack, including extra ammo. This Corsini may be harmless, but we won't take any chances."

"Maybe that's the idea," Bart said, his lip curling. "Maybe we ought to just put this loony out of his misery—"

Joel's face hardened. "We want Corsini alive, Sergeant.

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That goes for all of you. If he's found, we bring him back as a guest, and treat him that way until the supply ship comes to take him to Earth. Any man who harms him gets court-martialled."

Their expressions went sullen. Joel wanted to smile and soften his words, keep things friendly. Then he decided to do nothing.

They found the magician not more than forty miles from the landing site. He was a stooped, ragged figure, darting over the gray surface of the planet like a winged insect, casting a long shadow in the light of the Antara sun. As their copter dropped closer to the ground, they saw that his "wings" were the tattered remnants of an ancient dress suit.

"He's afraid of us," Palmer shouted, above the sound of the engine. "Look at him running—"

"How the hell does he *live* out here?" Flack said. "He couldn't be eating that muddy green stuff, could he? It looks about as edible as old dollar bills."

"It's edible," Palmer smiled. "Remember what Colonel Deegan said? It tastes like boiled lettuce, only not as good."

"He looks fat enough," Esquilla grunted. "It must be nourishing, anyway."

Joel pushed the copter fifty yards in front of the fleeing figure below; then he began to descend. The strange man beneath them halted, looked about wildly, and then began to retreat in the other direction. "He won't get far," Joel said, and brought the aircraft gently to the gray terrain.

They clambered out hurriedly and ran after the magician, with the Captain in the lead. His long legs and youthful wind kept him well in front of the others, until a sudden suspicion made him wheel about. He saw the sergeant drop to one knee and unstrap his rifle, ready to take aim at the galloping figure.

"*No!*" Joel shouted. "Put that rifle down!"

"Only gonna scare him, Captain—"

"I said put it down!"

Then there was a break: a good one for the crew, a bad one for Corsini, the Great. His clumsy body stumbled over a rock, and he crashed heavily to the ground. They heard his "oof!" of shock as he fell, and came running to surround him.

"Easy, easy," Joel cautioned. "Don't frighten him."

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Corsini looked up at them like a wounded, terrified animal. He was a short, fat man with a leonine head haloed by wild, stringy black hair. His chins quivered as he saw the uniformed, armed men who ringed him, and his eyes were round with fright.

"It's all right, Mr. Corsini," Joel said, bending to him. The magician made a noise in his throat and pushed his hand away. "We haven't come to hurt you. We—we're delegates from Earth. We came to invite you to pay us a visit."

Palmer chuckled, and the Sergeant snorted.

Again the magician made throat sounds, and Joel suddenly realized what they were. After so many years of solitude, Corsini must have done little talking, even to himself. His vocal chords were rusted with disuse; the words wouldn't emerge.

When they did, they were hoarse, and almost unintelligible.

"What—what do you want? Leave me alone—"

"We mean you no harm, sir, believe me. The Earth government has sent us here, to ask if you would come to Washington as an official guest. Our starship is only some forty miles from here; you can stay at our camp until the next ship arrives from Earth."

"No!" the man bellowed. "I won't go!"

"But Mr. Corsini—"

"I said no! This is my home! My kingdom! You can't make me leave it. I won't go with you!"

Joel clucked his tongue. "I'm afraid you'll *have* to, Mr. Corsini. You see, we have our orders. They'll be very disappointed in Washington if you don't show up—"

"You can't make me!" Corsini shrieked, rolling on the ground like a child in a tantrum. "You have no right here! You're trespassers. Trespassers!"

"Poor bum," Esquilla muttered.

"A nut," the sergeant growled. "Nothing but a nut."

"This is my planet! My world! You can't drive me off. You're the ones who have to leave. You're the ones!"

"But we're not leaving," Joel said gently. "You may as well get used to that idea, Mr. Corsini. We have food and drink at the ship, real food and drink, from Earth. I'll bet it's a long time since you tasted Earth food. Come with us, Mr. Corsini. You won't regret it." He put his

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hand on the man's elbow, and helped him to his feet.

They saw the tears rolling down Corsini's round cheeks.

"Trespasser," he whispered. "Invaders . . ."

They thought he had succumbed. But then the magician flung himself at the Captain like a giant bird, his coattails flying behind him, his hands like claws closing around Joel's windpipe. Joel fought, but the magician's arms held astonishing strength; then Sergeant Bart's rifle crashed on the thick mane of black hair, and Corsini groaned and sank to the ground.

"You fool!" Joel said harshly. "You may have killed him—"

"He was killing you, wasn't he?"

Joel bent over him. "Still alive, thank God. Palmer, Esquilla—help me get him into the copter. We'll take him to the ship and make him a prisoner, if that's how he wants it."

They bore the unconscious body to the waiting copter, and in the rapidly descending night that was falling on World A15, flew their captive back to the shipsite.

Captain Joel Saylor looked in on his captive in the morning. He was sitting inside the metal cage that had once housed construction equipment, its entrance sealed by a complex electronic lock. Corsini's head was bowed, and he looked as if his struggling days were done.

"Mr. Corsini."

The magician looked up slowly.

"Look, Mr. Corsini, I know how you feel about our coming here, but we're under military orders. We don't want to hurt you; all we want to do is see to your well-being. Surely you can't like the life on this world—"

"Why shouldn't I?" he whispered hoarsely. "It's my kingdom, isn't it? Shouldn't a king like his kingdom?"

"But the loneliness, and the food, and—" Joel scratched his head. "You didn't come here on purpose, did you?"

"No. No," Corsini said, his eyes distant. "*They* put me here, those people on the ship. I was a stowaway; I thought I might make my fortune in space. They laughed at me, called me crazy, and then—when they couldn't find the precious metals they sought—called me a Jonah. They landed here and left me behind. But they didn't know it would become my kingdom, and that I would rule all . . ."

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His eyes came back to focus on the present. They narrowed, and became shrewd and ugly.

"You'd better let me free, Captain," he said, almost confidingly. "It would be better for all of you, if you did."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Corsini."

"You'll regret it, Captain, believe me. I've learned to do things here, things so horrible you couldn't conceive of them. Let me go now, and leave my world, or—"

Joel stopped him. "Excuse me, Mr. Corsini; I have business at the ship."

"You better listen!" the magician said, hurtling himself at the door of his prison. "You better listen, Captain! If you don't leave, I'll bring plagues on you! Like Moses did to Egypt, I'll bring plagues!" He laughed excitedly at the idea. "Yes, like Moses! I'll torment you as you've never known torment before. You'll be sorry you ever saw my name—" His laugh increased in volume, rising to a weird crescendo.

"I'm sorry," Joel said piteously, and returned to the ship.

Corsini, the Great, didn't cease his wild threats for the rest of that day. His shouted curses, his intermittent sobs and maniacal laughter, even his sudden silences, began to fray the crew's nerves as they went about their duties. It was harder than ever for Joel to keep them a working team, to keep them interested in the project at hand.

But the night was worse, and at one point, Sergeant Bart threw aside the covers of his bunk and said:

"Doesn't that loony ever *sleep?* He's driving me crazy!"

Palmer drawled: "How about it, Captain? Maybe we should give our friend a knockout pill. We'll never get any rest this way."

Joel frowned. "We'll have to do something, all right. Maybe that's the best way to handle him."

"He won't eat our food," Palmer said, "but he doesn't refuse our whisky. How about giving him a slug, with a few drops of bye-bye liquid. I can take it out to him now."

"All right," Joel said. "If that's the only way."

A few minutes later, the navigator left the ship. They waited and listened, and were rewarded with silence from their prisoner. Joel sighed, and returned his head to the pillow.

But ten minutes passed, and Palmer didn't come back.

"What do you think, sir?"

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Sergeant Bart said. "Want me to investigate?"

"We'll both go."

Joel took a rifle, and preceded the Sergeant out of the ship and down the ladder. They walked across the starlit ground towards the prison.

Lt. Palmer was lying in front of the open door, his blood dark on the ground. The prison was empty.

"He got away!" the Sergeant blinked. "I don't see how he could have—he couldn't have forced the Lieutenant to open that trick lock—"

"But he did," Joel said, dropping to his knee. "Thank God Palmer's okay; just a rock wound on his forehead." He picked up the jagged stone by the injured man's side.

Palmer began to stir; then his eyes opened.

"Captain . . ."

"Easy, Palmer. What happened here? How did Corsini get away?"

"What?" The officer tried to rise, but his throbbing head must have changed his mind. He touched it, and drew away his hand, puzzled at the feel of his own blood. "How did this happen? What did he do to me?"

"You mean you don't *know*?"

"I don't know anything," the lieutenant groaned. "All I remember is handing him the whisky — and then seeing you."

Sergeant Bart cursed all madmen.

The Captain stood up and looked towards the dark horizon, thoughtfully.

"Then we have to do it all over again," he said. "We'll track the magician tomorrow. And hold him, this time."

It was Esquilla who made the discovery.

He was the first one up in the morning. Esquilla's family were farmers in Cuba; they woke up roosters. Esquilla, even in the alien dawn filtering through the ship's viewplate, stirred restlessly on his bunk at four-thirty, shiptime, and then finally gave up the fight and rose. He moved soundlessly between the bunks of the sleeping crew, and feeling a dryness in his throat, went to the water tank. He filled a cup, and brought it to his mouth.

His strangled shriek awoke the others. They leaped from their beds, ready to do battle with whatever other-world horror had entered the ship. They raced to him.

All they saw was Lt. Esquilla, clutching his throat and mumbling in another language, while he stared at the

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fallen cup with its spilled contents.

"What is it? What's up, Carlos?" Captain Saylor grabbed his shoulders. "Somebody get the lights on—"

Glare filled the cabin.

"For the love of God," Palmer said. "What *is* that stuff?"

Gary Flack bent over and touched it with his fingers, then brought his soiled hand to his nose.

"It looks like . . . blood . . ."

Esquilla found his voice. "In the drinking tank. That's where it came from. I came here in the dark and poured a cup, and it tasted hot and sticky . . ."

"It can't be," the Sergeant said. "You must be fooling us . . ."

"Try it yourself!" Esquilla said furiously.

Sergeant Bart shrugged, and took a cup from the rack. He pushed the button as the others watched. They didn't need his confirmation; they all saw the deep red stuff trickle slowly, thickly out of the tap.

"Ugh," Palmer said, wheeling about and going pale. "I feel like heaving . . ."

"It can't be blood!" Fisher said. "It must be some kind of discoloration, or contamination. Maybe some kind of algae got into the tank."

"That sealed tank?" Gary Flack said. "You're not as smart as you look, genius. Nothing could get into that tank without a cobalt bomb explosion."

"Let's take it easy," Joel said, trying to keep command. "No use panicking; we're bound to run into some strange stuff sooner or later. This isn't Earth."

"I tell you it's blood," Esquilla said. "Human blood. It's not contamination."

"I can soon find out," Fisher volunteered, searching for equipment on the shelf over his bunk. "Give me ten minutes, and I'll run an analysis. It might still be good for drinking—"

"Not me!" Palmer curled his lip. "I wouldn't drink that stuff if my tongue turned black."

"Go ahead," the Captain ordered. "Make your tests, Fisher."

The radioman did, hunching over the microscope with a smear of the red liquid on a slide beneath the lens. The crew of the *Fermi* waited expectantly for his answer.

He looked up, and with almost scholarly detachment, said:

"Yes, it's blood, all right. Human blood, Type O."

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There was silence in the cabin, until Gary Flack said:

"Don't you get it? Don't you see the gimmick? It's *him*."

"Who?"

"What's his name, Corsini. The crazy magician. He must have sneaked in here after his escape and pulled this stunt. It's his idea of a joke—"

They reacted with mixed emotions to Flack's explanation. The Sergeant swore and looked murderous. Fisher and Palmer looked unconvinced. Esquilla was beyond reaction; his dark eyes stared at the puddle of crimson on the shiny steel floor.

Only Captain Joel Saylor listened to the co-pilot's words, and shook his head in instantaneous understanding.

I'll bring plagues on you . . . like Moses brought the Pharoah, I'll bring plagues . . .

He alone had heard the magician's threat and promise. Only Joel knew, and only Joel remembered that the first plague visited upon Egypt by Moses and a revengeful Jehovah was the plague of blood . . .

He masked his face, and said, curtly:

"Let's be sensible. There was no way Corsini could have gotten into that tank. Until we have a better explanation, we'll have to accept the idea of contamination. And the next thing we have to do is locate a new source of water."

"The supply ship," Palmer said. "It won't be here for another couple of months. We'll die if we don't find one—"

"That's right. So we have to dig, and dig until we're exhausted."

"But how do we know there *are* underground wells?"

"It rains on A15, doesn't it? And there's vegetation. That means there's water somewhere, and we've got to get to it. It's that or die, so we can take our choice."

A silence.

"We'll dig," Flack said.

"And pray for rain," Palmer added, a small light of good humor returning to his face.

There weren't any prayers spoken aloud among the crew of the *Fermi* as they began their drilling operations. But five hours later, their mouths dry with the slate-gray dust of the planet, a gentle rain came out of the clouds. Whooping and shouting, they brought out every available container to catch the falling moisture; when the rain stopped six hours later, they had enough drinkable water to last them for weeks.

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They waited until the following day to renew their search for the escaped magician. For twelve hours, the copter scanned a two-hundred mile vicinity, searching for signs of Corsini's plump figure. The expedition wasn't successful; towards nightfall, the Captain said:

"We'll go down and make temporary camp here. Then we'll begin fresh in the morning."

They landed, and began to unload their supplies.

Nobody saw Palmer get separated from the others; he had wandered off to examine a grove of spongy leafs, to sample the weird botanical specimens of A15. They were only aware of it when they heard his terrified cry.

They came on the run in the direction of the sound, and when they saw the monstrous green thing enveloping the Lieutenant, they stopped in horror and shock, not knowing what to do next. At first, no one recognized the ghastly form of the thing that was pinning Palmer to the gray earth; then Esquilla shouted:

"Dios! a *frog*!"

The familiar word broke the almost superstitious spell they were under. Joel unstrapped his rifle and fired over the head of the beast; it raised its ugly horned body and its great maw fell open. The grotesquely enlarged frog bellowed and grunted at them in anger, and under its spread-eagled feet, Lieutenant Palmer wriggled free and broke into a staggering run.

Joel fired again, this time aiming to hurt the thing that was rearing to plunge at them. It spun under the bullet's impact, and gave a croak of defiance. Then it crouched and tried to spring, but the other rifles in the search party rained bullets at its head and soft underbelly. It shrieked in pain and fury, and sprawled forward in death.

They walked towards it, all except Palmer.

"A frog," Esquilla muttered. "A giant frog . . . millions of miles from Earth . . ." He crossed himself.

Gary Flack said: "I thought Deegan told us there wasn't any animal life on A15?"

"He did," Joel answered. "But I guess he was wrong. All right, let's settle down and get some sleep. We've got a long flying day tomorrow . . ."

They returned to the copter, and readied their sleeping bags for the night.

The droning noise began just when sleep was heaviest upon them. Joel heard it first,

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and opened its eyes to locate the source. It was dark, too dark for Planet A15, and he wondered what had happened to dim the lights of the diamond-bright stars that should have been shining overhead.

"What is it?" Flack whispered to him.

"I don't know. Something—something's happened to the stars."

"The stars?"

Flack looked up, and murmured at the blackness of the heavens. The droning sound intensified, and then they knew that the stars were still there, but their brightness was concealed behind a thick blanket of flying insects!

"Look out!" Flack yelled, as the droning became a roar, and the buzzing creatures swarmed over the sleeping figures on the ground. The others shrieked and leaped to their feet, batting at the insects, fighting to keep from smothering beneath their countless wings.

"The copter! Back to the copter!" Joel shouted, flapping his sleeping bag at the attackers. "We'll be eaten alive—"

Stumbling, gasping, filled with panic, the four men from the starship made their way to the copter door, and battled the angry black insects that were blotting out the white form of the aircraft. Joel threw himself at the controls and started the whirling blades; it cut a wide swath through the flying creatures, allowing them time enough to climb aboard. They shot upwards into the starless sky, slapping at the bugs remaining in the cabin, sobbing as they felt their painful bites and saw the red welts on their flesh.

At last they were free of them, and heading back for the safety of the starship. The stars appeared once more, and they knew the danger was past.

"What were they?" Palmer said. "Never saw anything like that—"

"Gnats or something," Flack said, looking at his reddened arms. "Worst swarm of gnats I ever saw. What do you think, Captain? What were they?"

Joel didn't say what his thoughts were, for they were thoughts of Corsini, the Great, and his promise.

What would be next?

They found out when the copter landed. Fisher, the radioman, came running towards them, his face contorted.

"What's wrong?" Joel said,

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climbing out to meet him. "What happened here?"

"Flies!" Fisher said explosively.

"What?"

"They were gnats," Palmer drawled. "We ran into them ourselves."

"No, flies!" Fisher insisted, scanning their faces anxiously. "Biggest damn flies you ever saw—maybe a foot long! They attacked the ship—we had to take cover—"

"Where's the Sergeant?"

"In the ship. I—I think he passed out. He's okay, just in shock; I can't blame him—the place was covered—"

They raced towards the ladder of the *Fermi*. Sergeant Bart was on his bunk, beneath a blanket, looking like a man recovering from a binge. Joel examined him swiftly, and confirmed Fisher's diagnosis.

"What did they do? Let's hear the story—"

"The food," Fisher said hoarsely.

"What?"

"They headed for the food supply. I don't know how they managed to get into the containers, but they did. They swarmed all over everything; all the food's rotten and maggoty now; we won't be able to touch it . . ."

"No food?" Palmer sat heavily on a bunk. "That really caps it! What do we do without food?"

"We'll eat grass if we have to," Joel said firmly. "We know the stuff is edible. We'll eat it until the ship comes."

They had their first sample later that day. Deegan had understated the effect of the spongy, edible leaf on their taste buds. It tasted like boiled lettuce, all right, but there were subtler flavors in it, too, and so revolting that three of the six-man crew were sick within thirty seconds of their first mouthful.

Fisher radioed Earth that night, and told them their situation. They made no promises of expediting the arrival of the supply ship.

"All right," Joel told them. "If it gets too unbearable, then we'll do the only sensible thing. We'll blast off in the *Fermi* and meet the supply ship half-way."

But the next day, co-pilot Gary Flack had another disastrous announcement.

"We won't be able to use the ship, Captain. Not for quite a while."

"What? Why not?"

"I've just made an inspection of the engines. Something's gotten into them, clogged the rocket chambers. Some kind of tough barnacles.

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The guts of the *Fermi* are lousy with 'em. It'll take us a month to clean her up."

Joel sighed. "Then let's start cleaning."

He walked away from his co-pilot, thinking about the curse which had fallen upon the expedition.

"Blood," he thought. "Frogs, gnats, flies . . . and now a murrain upon the ship . . ."

He reached down and rubbed the calf of his right leg. It responded painfully to his touch. He didn't know what caused it until later that night, preparing for bed, when the affliction was widespread among the crew.

"Boils!" Sergeant Bart cursed. "I'm covered with 'em! I can't sit or stand—"

"Oh, God!" Esquilla said angrily, shaking his fist at the sky. "What are you doing to us?"

Lt. Fisher, holding his hand to a fiery eruption over his left eye, stared thoughtfully out of the ship's viewplate.

"Don't you see what's happening? Don't you recognize it?"

Joel went icy. "What do you mean?"

"The boils. The sixth plague of Egypt. And all the other things that have been happening to us . . ."

"You're crazy," Palmer said, lying on his bunk and squirming with discomfort. "Its this lousy planet; something in the atmosphere."

The Captain stood up and went to the hatchway.

"Where are you going, Captain?"

"I'm taking the copter out, alone. Maybe our magician friend will show up if he knows I'm alone. Maybe I can talk to him . . ."

Palmer struggled to sit up. "You think Corsini's behind this?"

"I don't know. But I'll try and find out."

He went down the ladder, and towards the waiting copter.

Two hours later, he saw the fat figure of Corsini the Great waving his short, stumpy arms at the aircraft.

Joel brought the copter to the ground, and stepped out, unencumbered by weapons.

Corsini waited impassively as the Captain strode towards him, his arms folded across the soiled jacket of his ancient dress suit. When Joel was within five yards, he said:

"Kneel!"

Joel stopped, and his mouth tightened.

"Don't be stupid, Corsini. I've come to talk to you."

"Kneel," the magician said.

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"You're in the presence of a king, Captain. Custom demands it."

Grumbling, Joel dropped to his knees.

"Now," Corsini gloated. "What is it you wish?"

"I want to know something. These things that have been happening to us. Are you responsible?"

"Of course. I have been making good my promise, Captain. As Moses freed the Israelites from the chains of Egypt, I will free my planet from the chains of Earth. I will drive you forth with terrible plagues . . ."

"But how?" Joel said. "How do you do it?"

Corsini laughed.

"The first rule of magicians, Captain—reveal no secrets to the laymen. I have my methods, and you have not yet seen the full scope of my powers. Have you come to tell me that you are leaving, that you will leave me to my world?"

Joel got to his feet.

"No," he said quietly. "I came to warn you."

"*Kneel!*" the magician shouted.

"No, Corsini. No more kneeling. I came to tell you that whatever tricks you're playing on us must stop at once. If they don't, we'll ignore the command to bring you back alive to Earth. We'll kill you."

The magician rubbed his lower chin, and smiled.

"Simple as that, Captain? I doubt it. My bag of tricks hasn't been fully opened, you know. Beware of the seventh plague, Captain."

"It's my final warning, Corsini. My next order will be to shoot you on sight."

"Goodbye, Captain," the magician said, and turned away.

Joel went back to the copter. He pretended to start the engine, and then reached hurriedly for the rifle on the seat. But when he looked back at the spot where the conference had taken place, Corsini, the Great, was gone.

He came back to the ship, to find the crew of the *Fermi* lying unconscious on the ground.

Joel didn't breathe normally until he had examined the fallen men one by one, and determined that all were alive.

Slowly, the four officers and Sergeant Bart awakened, looking about them in bewilderment. They were dazed, stupefied by what had happened, but beyond their ragged mental states, no damage had been done.

"Stones," Palmer told the Captain. "Enormous boulders.

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God knows where they came from. They dropped right out of the sky, knocked us down . . ." He looked about him, at the bare flat terrain, his eyes puzzled.

"Nothing here," Joel said. "No stones, Lieutenant."

"They *were* stones," Fisher said tightly. "Hailstones, Captain. The seventh plague of Egypt—"

"I say let's get out of here," Flack said casually. "Finish up the scraping job and get out. A few more days like this, and we'll be washed up anyway."

"We're not leaving," Joel said. "We've got an assignment and we're carrying it out."

"The seventh plague, Captain," Fisher said insistently. "And the eighth—"

"I know," Joel said curtly. "So now we know what to look for. The next problem will be locusts . . ."

"Locusts?" Flack said.

"If Corsini sticks to the script, that's what we can expect. There'll probably be a swarm of them, an all-out attack. But we're prepared this time; we'll make plans to get inside the ship at the first sign of trouble. We'll use heat guns to blast them; if they get too troublesome, we'll try and get the *Fermi* off the ground and burn them with our rocket fire. Understand?"

"But Captain—"

"Never mind the questions!" Joel said angrily. "Just keep your eyes peeled. All we can do is watch and wait."

They waited.

Four hours later, the locusts came.

But the men of the starship *Fermi*, with heat guns poised, with minds prepared for battle, didn't fire a shot.

They weren't ordinary locusts. They were a hundred times larger, and greener, and uglier; their wing spread was incredible; the noise they made was deafening.

But the real horror was in the faces of the unholy creatures that launched their attack against the starship. Imbedded in each monstrous head was the face of a woman—a different woman.

"Oh, God, God!" Esquilla screamed, dropping his weapon with a clatter. "It's Marie! Marie!"

Gary Flack stared with incredulous eyes. "Sally," he muttered, a low giggle starting in his throat. "Its Sally; I can recognize her . . ."

"Dorothy! Oh my Lord, Dorothy!" Fisher shouted, leaping for the hatchway.

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"I've got to go out there—got to reach her—"

Joel dived for the radioman's slight figure, and brought it crashing into the bulkhead of the ship. Fisher struggled violently, but Joel was stronger. He pinned him to the bunk, and slapped the thin cheeks hard. "Easy, easy!" he panted. "It's another rotten trick, only a trick . . ."

Fisher began to sob, and the Captain returned to the viewplate, unable to turn his fascinated gaze from the things thudding against the ship.

Then he saw Helen's face. It was smiling, sweetly, in the angelic, madonna-like way Helen had, the way she had smiled at him on their last day together in Roanoke. Her violet eyes were misty, and when they met his, the world called A15 spun dizzily in Joel's eyes, and he felt the dark of unconsciousness cover him.

When he awoke, the darkness was still there.

"Palmer," he said. "Flack!"

No answer.

"Esquilla! Fisher! Sergeant Bart!"

"Here," a voice whispered. "Over here . . ."

He felt his way along the edge of the bunk until his fingers touched another hand.

"Who is it?"

"Me, Sergeant Bart. The others are outside, wandering around. I told 'em not to, Captain, honest I did. I told 'em it was best to stay in the ship, so we don't get lost or separated . . ."

"What's happening? I can't see, Sergeant!"

"None of us can, Captain. It happened after the locusts. Everything went dark, all over the planet. We tried to light flares, but we couldn't see a thing. It's us, Captain." His voice neared the edge of hysteria. "We're blind. He's made us blind!"

"Take it easy," Joel said unsteadily. "It's only another trick. It'll pass, Sergeant, like all the rest."

"When, Captain? When?"

"I don't know!"

Joel put his hands to his face, rubbing his fists violently into his blinded eyes.

"When, Captain?" the Sergeant said hollowly, his voice yearning.

"Shut up!" Joel screamed. He got up and staggered against the wall, guiding himself towards the hatchway.

"Don't go, Captain. Don't go out there—"

But Joel went, down the ladder clumsily, falling at its base. He got to his feet, swaying, and shouted:

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"Corsini!"

His voice echoed faintly, even over the flat plains of World A15.

"Corsini, where are you?"

He heard a shuffling sound beside him. He whirled, and the low voice of the magician came to his ear.

"You want me, Captain?"

Joel clutched at air. "Where are you, damn you? Where the hell are you?"

Corsini sniggered. "It's no use, Captain. I can see you, and you can't see me. Not a fair fight, Captain."

"You've got to stop this, Corsini. You've got to give us back our sight!"

"Gladly, Captain. I mean you no harm. But there are certain conditions—"

"We have orders! This isn't our idea!"

"Nevertheless, Captain. If you wish to see again, you must make me a promise. Or else the plague of darkness will remain with you and your men forever . . ."

Joel tried to think, tried to reason, but no answer came to his mind except surrender.

"All right," he said wearily. "Whatever you want, Corsini."

"I want you to leave. Leave this world and never return. Will you promise that, Captain?"

"Yes!"

"A solemn promise, Captain."

"You have my word," Joel groaned.

"Then you will see again," the magician said.

He heard Corsini laugh, and then heard nothing more.

A few moments later, the light returned to the eyes of the captain and his men. But their restored vision didn't include sight of Corsini, the Great.

"How did you do it, Captain?" Flack said. "What did you tell him?"

"I—I said we would leave. I gave him my promise."

"And are we?"

"No," Joel said stubbornly. "Not unless Earth headquarters says we can. I'll have Fisher radio them now, and tell them what's happened. If they say go, we go. If they order us to stay—"

"But what if he comes back? What if Corsini—

"It doesn't matter," Joel Saylor said, his shoulders slumping. Then he walked away, not wanting to see the look in the eyes of his men.

Within three hours, the captain called a council of war.

"I have something important to say. Lt. Fisher has radioed Earth, and their or-

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ders are just what I expected them to be. We're to hold our ground, and do what we can to end the menace that Corsini represents. We don't have to worry about previous orders; we can deal with him as we see fit."

Esquilla snorted. "Bravo. So we can kill our phantom, if we can catch him."

"All right, Lieutenant. So he's got us whipped right now. But that doesn't mean we have to give up."

There was a pause. Then Palmer said:

"What about the next plague, Captain?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. If Corsini continues to run true to form, then we all know what his next trick will be. In his madness, he's following the Book of Exodus, and the tenth plague is next on the program. The death of the firstborn—"

"Firstborn?" the sergeant growled. "I ain't got no kids—"

"None of us have," Joel said. "I mean the death of the firstborn among ourselves."

He studied their faces in turn. Esquilla was staring at the floor. Flack and Palmer were somber. Fisher's eyes were hooded. Only the sergeant's face showed anything; it may have been relief.

"I know what you're thinking," Joel said. "If the next plague comes, it means you won't have a captain for this crew. So the first order of business is to elect a new leader, just in case." He turned to Gary Flack. "It's up to you, Lieutenant, in case anything happens."

Fisher looked ready to cry. "You don't really think it will, Captain?"

"No," Joel smiled. "I don't."

"Why not?" Bart grunted. "That crazy Corsini's made good on all the other plagues. Why not this one?"

"Because all the other plagues were imaginary, that's why. The water wasn't blood—it was water, good drinking water—"

"But I tested it," Fisher said, "analyzed it."

"Even your analysis was imaginary, Lieutenant. You saw what Corsini wanted you to see. That frog was a phantom, too, and so were the gnats, and the flies, and the barnacles on our ship. So were the boils, and the hailstones—"

"But they knocked us out. How did that happen?"

"Then where were the stones? And how was it that nobody was hurt, bruised, even scratched? They might

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have been cotton wadding for all the tangible damage they inflicted. And the darkness, the blindness — where else is sight but in the mind? Don't you see? Corsini was a hypnotist, a master hypnotist. These fourteen years alone have given him greater hypnotic power than anyone could dream possible. He's got us all under some kind of spell—but he can't really *hurt* us. He could drive us crazy, that's for sure, but he can't inflict actual physical harm. And that's why I'm not worried about the tenth plague."

Flack whistled softly.

"I'm glad you're not worried, Captain. Cause if *I* were the oldest . . ."

"But you're not," Joel said stiffly. "I am. And if Corsini thinks he can kill me—let him try."

They all slept badly that night. Yet sleep, the peculiar heavy sleep that the heavy night air of A15 encouraged, finally came.

In the morning, Joel woke first.

He looked at the sleeping figures of his men, and said a grateful prayer to God for sparing him in the night, for making his prediction come true for at least a few more hours.

One by one, the crew members awakened. Esquilla got up first, grinning when he saw the captain. Then Palmer and Flack awoke, stretching and yawning. Fisher was next.

Yet Sergeant Bart remained in his bunk.

"Hey, Sarge," Palmer said cheerfully. "Rise and shine."

But Bart remained motionless.

"Hey, Willie. Let's get out of that sack, fella."

When he didn't respond, Palmer touched the sergeant's shoulder. Then, in a sudden surge of anxiety, he turned him on the bed.

They looked at his open, staring eyes.

"Oh, God," Palmer whispered.

"He's dead. Bart's dead!"

"He got the wrong one," Flack said. "He got the wrong man . . ."

Fisher came to their side.

"No. No, he didn't."

They turned to him.

"Bart was the oldest," he said mournfully. "I was the only one who knew; he got drunk the night of the party, and told me about it. He's been lying about his age for years; he didn't want to wash out of space service. He was thirty-one; almost too old for space training . . ." Tears gleamed behind Fisher's heavy glasses.

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Joel bent over the body.

"Wait a minute," he said.

"What is it, Captain?"

"This wasn't any plague. This wasn't hypnotic—"

"I don't get you," Flack said.

"Look!" Joel pointed. "Those marks on his throat. There wasn't any magic in what Corsini did. He might have put us to sleep, so we couldn't hear what was happening. But those are fingermarks on Bart's neck. Corsini strangled him!"

They all saw them clearly now: the red imprints on the white flesh of the Sergeant.

"That rotten coward!" Palmer said.

"We'll get him," Flack swore. "We've got to get him—"

"We'll get him all right," Joel said grimly. "We'll get him with treachery. Flack—Esquilla—prepare the *Fermi* for takeoff."

"What?"

"You heard me. I want to leave A15 within the hour. I want to blast off this Godforsaken planet as soon as we can—"

"But our orders—"

"Don't worry," Joel went to the viewplate. "We're not going for long, Lieutenant. Only long enough to make that madman think we've gone. Then we're coming back, and getting rid of him once and for all."

They watched him uncertainly.

"Get going!" Joel shouted.

They went into action, a smooth-working team.

In less than an hour, the rockets of the Fermi were rumbling, and the fire started in the chambers. A few moments later, the huge starship lifted itself from the seared ground, and rose into the heavens, dividing the gray clouds as Moses had divided the sea . . .

"We'll make a shallow orbit around the planet," Joel instructed. "Then we'll head straight back for our original landing position. Unless I miss my guess, our magician friend will be in the vicinity, celebrating his victory. He'll have a surprise coming."

Two hours later, the starship was turning, and its nose cut through the thin upper atmosphere of World A15. The gray terrain loomed up once again in the viewplate as they made the slow descent.

They were within a thousand feet of the planet when Flack shouted:

"Look! There he is!"

In the telescopic sight, they saw the figure of Corsini, the

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Great, his arms raised, his hands balled into fists, a picture of wrath.

"Now," Captain Saylor said grimly.

The starship veered and descended again, its landing rockets roaring full blast, the scorching fire burning the gray earth into white, dusty clouds. In the sighting mechanism, they saw the awkward figure of the magician fleeing from the menace of the ship's fiery rockets, but his short legs couldn't outrun them.

They averted their eyes when they saw Corsini stumble and fall, and were grateful when the roar of the rockets hid the shriek of horror that came from his throat as the flames engulfed him.

Then there was nothing more than a smudge of ashes beneath the ship, ashes that were swirled away by the winds of planet A15 . . .

Colonel Deegan stood up as Captain Joel Saylor entered his office. He answered his salute with a perfunctory wave of his hand, and asked the captain to sit.

Then he examined the face which Joel Saylor had brought back from three years in space. It was still a young face, but the eyes were different, and there were more lines permanently engraved about the mouth.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Deegan said quietly.

"Yes. Why not?"

"I know how you must feel. I told you my own experience, Captain, the first day we met. But now I want to hear yours."

Joel studied his hands. They were trembling, so he locked them in his lap.

"I—I don't know how it really happened. With the magician dead, we returned to our routine chores. We operated our transmitter, and took astronomical data, and kept the space traffic, such as it was, flowing throughout the Antara system. We sat around and talked, and watched our movies, and wrote letters, and tried to get to know each other. But when we found the work wasn't enough, that the talk wasn't satisfying, that the movies weren't entertaining. We got to know each other, all right, and the more we knew, the more we hated each other's faults, and even virtues. We began to quarrel. We began to fight. Finally, we began to kill . . ."

"Esquilla . . ."

"I don't think Palmer meant to kill him. But when he did, in the heat of their

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argument, and Flack saw Esquilla fall to the ground—"

Joel lifted his shaking hands and covered his face.

"Two dead," he said. "Two dead, one mad, the assignment a failure . . ."

"Easy, Captain."

"We didn't know how well off we were when Corsini was after us. His plagues drew us together, united us against a common enemy, made us a unit. For months, he gave us something to occupy our minds and our actions, something to fight for, to live for. But when the magician died, there was nothing else. Only space, and that cold planet, and boredom, and each other . . .

"That was the worst plague of all, Colonel," Joel Saylor said, meeting the officer's somber eyes. Loneliness . . ."

THE END

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General Webb had a simply magnificent idea for getting ground forces into the enemy's territory despite rockets and missiles and things like that. It was a grand scheme, except for one

MINOR DETAIL

By JACK SHARKEY

THE Secretary of Defense, flown in by special plane from the new Capitol Building in Denver, trotted down the ramp with his right hand outstretched before him.

At the base of the ramp his hand was touched, clutched and hidden by the right hand of General "Smiley" Webb in a hearty parody of a casual handshake. General Webb did everything in a big way, and that included even little things like handshakes.

Retrieving his hand once more, James Whitlow, the Secretary of Defense, smiled nervously with his tiny mouth, and said,

"Well, here I am."

This statement was taken down by a hovering circle of newsreporters, dispatched by wireless and telephone to every town in the forty-nine states, expanded, contracted, quoted and misquoted, ignored and misconstrued, and then forgotten; all this in a matter of hours.

The nation, hearing it, put aside its wonted trepidations, took an extra tranquilizer or two, and felt secure once more. The government was in good hands.

Leaving the reporters in a disgruntled group beyond the cyclone - fence - and - barbed - wire barriers surrounding Project W, General Webb, seated beside Whitlow in the back of his private car, sighed and folded his arms.

"You'll be amazed!" he chortled, nudging his companion with a bony elbow.

"I—I expect so," said Whitlow, clinging to his brief case

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with both hands. It contained, among other things, a volume of mystery stories and a ham sandwich, neatly packaged in aluminum foil. Whitlow didn't want to chance losing it. Not, at least, until he'd eaten the sandwich.

"Of course, you're wondering where I got the idea for my project," said "Smiley" Webb, adding, for the benefit of his driver, "Keep your eyes on the road, Sergeant! The WAC barracks will still be there when you get off duty!"

"Yes, sir," came a hollow grunt from the front seat.

"Weren't you?" asked General Webb, gleaming a toothy smile in Whitlow's direction.

"Weren't I *what?*" Whitlow asked miserably, having lost the thread of their conversation due to a surreptitious glance backward at the WAC barracks in their wake.

"Wondering about the project!" snapped the general.

"Yes. We *all* were," said the Secretary of Defense, appending somewhat tartly, "That's why they *sent* me here."

"To be sure. To be sure." General Webb muttered. He didn't much like tartness in responses, but the Secretary of Defense, unfortunately, was hardly a subordinate, and therefore not subject to the general's choler. Silly little ass! he said to himself. Rather liking the sound of the words—albeit in his mind—he repeated them over again, adding embellishments like "pompous" and "mousy" and "squirrel-eyed." After three or four such thoughts, the general felt much better.

"*I* thought the whole thing up, myself," he said, proudly.

"I wish you'd stop being so ambiguous," Whitlow protested in a small voice. "Just what *is* this project? How does it work? Will it help us win the war?"

"*Sssh!*" said the general, jerking a quivering forefinger perpendicular before pursed lips. "Security!"

He closed one eye in a broad wink and wriggled a thumb in the direction of the driver. "He's only cleared for Confidential material," said the general, his tone casting aspersions on the sergeant's patriotism, ancestry and personal hygiene. "This project is, of course, *Top Secret!*" He said the words reverently, his face going all noble and brave. Whitlow half-expected him to remove his hat, but he did not.

They drove onward, then, in silence, until they passed by a large field, in the center of which Whitlow could discern the outlines of an immense bull's-eye, in front of a tall, somewhat rickety khaki-colored reviewing stand, draped in tired bunting.

"What's that?" asked Whitlow, relinquishing his grip on his brief case long enough to point toward the field.

"*Ssssh!*" said "Smiley" Webb. "You'll find out in a matter of hours."

"Many hours?" Whitlow ask-

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ed, thinking of the ham sandwich.

General Webb consulted a magnificent platinum timepiece anchored to his thick hairy wrist by a stout leather strap.

"In exactly one hour, thirty-seven minutes, and forty - three-point - oh - oh - nine seconds!" he said, proudly.

"Thank you," Whitlow sighed. "You're certainly running this thing—whatever it is—in an efficient manner."

"Thank *you!*" General Webb glowed. "We like to think so," he added modestly.

Passwords, signs, countersigns, combination-locks and electronic recognition signals were negotiated one by one, until Whitlow was despairing of ever getting into the heart of Project W. He said as much to General Webb, who merely flashed the grin which gave him his nickname, and opened a final door.

For a moment, Whitlow thought he was going deaf. The shrill roar of screeching metal and throbbing dynamos that pounded at his eardrums began to fuddle his mind, until General Webb handed him a small cardboard box—also stamped, like every door and wall in the place, "Top Secret"— in which his trembling fingers located two ordinary rubber earplugs, which he instantly put to good use.

"There she is!" said General Webb, proudly, gesturing over the railing of the small balcony upon which they stood. "The Whirligig!"

"What?" called Secretary of Defense Whitlow, shaking his head to indicate he hadn't heard a word.

Somewhat piqued, but resigned, General Webb leaned his wide mouth nearly up against Whitlow's small pink plugged ear, and roared the same information at the top of his lungs.

Whitlow, a little stunned by the volume despite the plugs, nodded wearily, to indicate that he'd heard, then asked, in a high, piping voice, "What's it for?"

Webb's eyes bulged in their sockets. "Great heavens, man, can't you *see?*" He gestured down at his creation, his baby, his project, as though it were self-evident what its function was.

Whitlow strained his eyes to divine anything that might give a clue as to just what the government had been pouring money into for the past eight months. All he saw was what appeared to be a sort of ferris-wheel, except that it was revolving in a horizontal plane. The structure was completely enclosed in metal, and was whirling too fast for even the central shaft to be anything but a hazy, silver-blue blur.

"I see it," he shouted, squeakily. "But I don't understand it!"

"Come with me," said General Webb, re-opening the door at their backs. He was just about to step through when, with a

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quick blush of mortification, he remembered the "Top Secret" earplugs. Hastily, averting his face lest the other man see his embarrassment, he returned his plugs to their box, and did the same with Whitlow's.

Whitlow was glad when the door closed behind them.

"My office is this way," said Webb, striding off in a stiff military manner.

Whitlow, with a forlorn shrug, could do nothing but clutch his brief case and follow.

"It's this way," General Webb began, once they were seated uncomfortably in his office. From a pocket in his khaki jacket, Webb had produced a big-bowled calabash pipe, and was puffing its noxious gray fumes in all directions while he spoke. "Up until the late fifties, war was a simple thing . . ."

Oh, not the March of Science Speech! said Whitlow to himself. He knew it by heart. It was the talk of the Capital, and the nightmare of military strategists. As the general's voice droned on and on, Whitlow barely listened. The general, Top Secret or no Top Secret, was divulging nothing that wasn't common knowledge from the ruins of Philadelphia to the great Hollywood crater . . .

All at once, weapons had gotten *too* good. That was the whole problem. Wars, no matter what the abilities of the death-dealing guns, cannon, rifles, rockets or whatever, needed one thing on the battlefield that could not be turned out in a factory: Men.

In order to win a war, a country must be vanquished. In order to vanquish a country, soldiers must be landed. And that was precisely wherein the difficulty lay: landing the soldiers.

Ships were nearly obsolete in this respect. Landing barges could be blown out of the water as fast as they were let down into it.

Paratroops were likewise hopeless. The slow-moving troop-carrying planes daren't even peek above the enemy's horizon without chancing an onslaught of "thinking" rockets that would stay on their trail until they were molten cinders falling into the sea.

So someone invented the supersonic carrier. This was pretty good, allowing the planes to come in high and fast over the enemy's territory, as fast as the land-to-air missiles themselves. The only drawback was that the first men to try parachuting at that speed were battered to confetti by the slipstream of their own carriers. That would not do.

Next, someone thought of the capsules. Each man was packed into a break-proof, shock-proof, water-proof, wind-proof plastic capsule, and ejected safely beyond the slipstream area of the carriers, at which point, each capsule sprouted a silken chute that lowered the enclosed men gently down into range of the enemy's rocket-fire . . .

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This plan was scrapped like the others.

And so, things were at a stalemate. There hadn't been a really good skirmish for nearly five years. War was hardly anything but a memory, what with both sides practically omnipotent. Unless troops could be landed, war was downright impossible. And, no one could land troops, so there was no war.

As a matter of fact, Whitlow *liked* the state of affairs. To be Secretary of Defense during a years-long peace was a soft job to top all soft jobs. And Whitlow didn't much like war. He'd rather live peacefully with his mystery stories and ham sandwiches.

But the Capitol, under the relentless lobbying of the munitions interests, was trying to find a way to get a war started.

They *had* tried simply bombing the other countries, but it hadn't worked out too well: the other countries had bombed back.

This plan had been scrapped as too dangerous.

And then, just when all seemed lost, when it looked as though mankind was doomed to eternal peace . . .

Along came General "Smiley" Webb.

"Land troops?" he'd said, confidently, "nothing easier. With the government's cooperation, I can have our troops in any country in the world, safely landed, within the space of one year!"

Congress had voted him the money unanimously, and off he'd gone to work at Project W. No one knew *quite* what it was about, but the general had seemed so self-assured that—Well, they'd almost forgotten about him until some ambitious clerk, trying to balance at least *part* of the budget, had discovered a monthly expenditure to an obscure base in the southwest totalling some millions of dollars. Perfunctory checking had brought out the fact that "Smiley" Webb had been drawing this money every month, and hadn't as much as mailed in a single progress report.

There'd been swift phone-calls from Denver to Project W, and, General Webb informed them, not only was all the money to be accounted for, but so was all the time and effort: the project was completed, and about to be tested. Would someone like to come down and watch?

Someone would.

And thus it was that James Whitlow, with mystery stories and ham sandwich, had taken the first plane from the Capital . . .

". . . when all at once, I thought: Speed! Endurance! *That* is the problem!" said Webb, breaking in on Whitlow's reverie.

"I beg your pardon?" said the Secretary of Defense.

Webb whacked the dottle out of his pipe into a meaty palm, tossed the smoking cinders rather carelessly into a waste-

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basket, and leaned forward to confront the other man face to face, their noses almost nudging.

"Why are parachutes out?" he snapped.

"They go too slow," said Whitlow.

"Why do we use parachutes at all?"

"To keep the men from getting killed by the fall."

"Why does a fall kill the men?"

"It— It breaks their bones and stuff."

"*Bah!*" Webb scoffed.

"Bah?" reiterated Whitlow. "Bah?"

"Certainly bah!" said the general. "All it takes is a little training."

"All *what* takes?" said Whitlow, helplessly.

"Falling, man, falling!" the general boomed. "If a man can fall safely from ten feet— Why not from ten times ten feet!?"

"Because," said Whitlow, "increasing height accelerates the *rate* of falling, and—"

"*Poppycock!*" the general roared.

"Yes, sir," said Whitlow, somewhat cowed.

"Muscle-building. That's the secret. Endurance. Stress. Strain. Tension."

"If— If you say so . . ." said Whitlow, slumping lower and lower in his chair as the general's massive form leaned precariously over him. "But—"

"Of *course* you are puzzled," said the general, suddenly chummy. "Anyone would be. Until they realized the use to which I've put the Whirligig!"

"Yes. Yes, I suppose so . . ." said Whitlow, thinking longingly of his ham sandwich, and its crunchy, moist green smear of pickle relish.

"The first day—" said General Webb, "it revolved at *one* gravity! They withstood it!"

"What did? Who withstood? When?" asked Whitlow, with much confusion.

"The men!" said the general, irritably. "The men in the Whirligig!"

Whitlow jerked bolt upright. "There are *men* in that thing?" It's not possible, he thought.

"Of course," said Webb, soothingly. "But they're all right. They've been in there for thirty days, whirling around at one gravity more each day. We have constant telephone communication with them. They're all feeling fine, just fine."

"But—" Whitlow said, weakly.

General Webb had him firmly by the arm, and was leading him out of the office. "We must get to the stands, man. Operation Human Bomb in ten minutes."

"Bomb?" Whitlow squeaked, scurrying alongside Webb as the larger man strode down the echoing corridor.

"A euphemism, of course," said Webb. "Because they will fall much like a bomb does. But they will not explode! No, they will land, rifles in hand, ready

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to take over the enemy territory."

"Without parachutes?" Whitlow marveled.

"Exactly," said the general, leading the way out into the blinding desert sunlight. "You see," he remarked, as they strolled toward the heat-shimmering outlines of the reviewing stand, its bunting hanging limp and faded in the dry, breezeless air, "it's really so simple I'm astonished the enemy didn't think of it first. Though, of course, I'm glad they didn't— Ha! ha!" He oozed self-appreciation.

"Ha ha," repeated Whitlow, with little enthusiasm.

"When one is whirled at one gravity, you see, the wall—the outside rim—of the Whirligig, becomes the floor for the men inside. Each day, they have spent up to ten hours doing nothing but deep knee-bends, and eating high protein foods. Their legs will be able to withstand *any* force of landing. If they can do deep knee-bends at thirty gravities—during which, of course, each of them weighed nearly three tons—they can jump from any height and survive. Good, huh?"

Whitlow was worried as they clambered up into the stands. There seemed to be no one about but the two of them.

"Who else is coming?" he asked.

"Just us," said Webb. "I'm the only one with a clearance high enough to watch this. You're only here because you're *my* guest."

"But—" said Whitlow, observing the heat-baked wide-open spaces extending on all sides of the reviewing stand and bull's-eye, "the men on this base can surely watch from almost anywhere not beyond the horizon."

"They'd *better* not!" was the general's only comment.

"Well," said Whitlow, "what happens now?"

"The men that were in that Whirligig have—since you and I went to my office to chat—been transported to the airfield, from which point they were taken aloft—" he consulted his watch, "five minutes, and fifty-five-point-six seconds ago."

"And?" asked Whitlow, casually unbuckling the straps of his brief case and slipping out his sandwich.

"The plane will be within bomb vector of this target in just ten seconds!" said Webb, confidently.

Whitlow listened, for the next nine seconds, then, right on schedule, he heard the muted droning of a plane, high up. Webb joggled him with an elbow. "They'll fall faster than any known enemy weapon can track them," he said, smugly.

"That's fortunate," said Whitlow, munching desultorily at his sandwich. "Bud dere's wud thig budduhs bee."

"Hmmf?" asked the general.

Whitlow swallowed hastily. "I say, there's one thing bothers me."

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"What's that?" asked the general.

"Well, it's just that gravity is centripetal, you know, and the Whirligig is centrifugal. I wondered if it might not make some sort of difference?"

"Bah!" said General Webb. "Just a minor detail."

"If you say so," Whitlow shrugged.

"There they come!" shouted the general, jumping to his feet.

Whitlow, despite his misgivings, found that he, too, was on his feet, staring skyward at the tiny dots that were detaching themselves from the shining bulk of the carrier plane. As he watched, his heart beating madly, the dots grew bigger, and soon, awfully soon, they could be distinguished as man-shaped, too.

"There's— There's something wrong!" said the general. "What's that they're all shouting? It *should* be 'Geronimo' . . ."

Whitlow listened. "It sounds more like 'Eeeeeyaaaaa'," he said.

And it was.

The sound grew from a distant mumble to a shrieking roar, and the next thing, each man had landed upon the concrete-and-paint bullseye before the reviewing stand.

Whitlow sighed and re-buckled his brief case.

The general moaned and fainted.

And the men of the Whirligig, all of whom had landed on the target head-first, did nothing, their magnificently-muscled legs waving idly in a sudden gentle gust of desert breeze.

THE END

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No one cared that Peter Miles had disappeared on V-5 . . . except his wife. In her desperation she had to depend on

THE SEVEN EYES OF CAPTAIN DARK

By O. H. LESLIE

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

THE black waters of the bay lapped against the side of the Soloboat as the woman stepped onto the pier. Her heavy greatcoat was mannishly cut, its shawl collar concealing whatever troubled expression she wore. Skoggard wrung his hands in despair, and looked back to the island rock where his master's fortress, never before assailed by woman, sat squat and forbidding and without light.

"I told you it's no use, Mrs. Miles," he said nervously. "Captain Dark just doesn't see people any more."

"I'll take that chance," the woman said.

"Please, go back to the mainland, Mrs. Miles. I'll try and convince him to see you, but some other time—"

"I have to see him *now*," the woman said, and preceded the thin, anguished figure up the path towards the house. Her step was firm, and Skoggard knew he couldn't halt her progress. With a sigh, he raced ahead of her to prepare the captain for her visit.

On the Widow's Walk, its spyglass rusted with disuse, the captain lay full length on a springless divan. Lying down, he appeared even taller and broader than he was, a Gulliver chained by a different kind of captor. He was under forty, but the gray-

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Captain Jonathan Dark

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streaked beard he had grown during his island exile gave him the appearance of a Biblical prophet; only the lean, hard line of his body announced the truth of his age.

Skoggard hesitated at the doorway, breathing hard, afraid to disturb him, afraid to let him be. Dark spoke.

"What is it, Skoggard? You sound like you're in a state."

"I'm sorry, Captain. I tried to stop her from coming, but she insisted—"

Dark swung his legs to the floor and glared at his servant. "Who is *she?*"

"The woman who sent us those letters, that Mrs. Miles. She pulled up in a Soloboat a little while ago. I tried to keep her out, but she followed me here."

Dark got to his feet, steadying himself against the stone terrace wall. He turned his face to the sea, listening for the sound of breakers. Then his hands found the old telescope, and he rubbed its length affectionately. The spyglass, and the house, had once belonged to a sea captain, now five hundred years dead. Captain Jonathan Dark, until recently master of the starship *Empress*, felt a strange kinship across the centuries.

"All right, then," he said gravely. "If Mrs. Miles is that insistent, the least we can do is be polite. Show her into the study."

When she entered, the captain was already ensconced behind the great oak desk, in a room that resembled the cabin of a sailing ship. The only anachronism was the spaceship model which rose aspiringly from its surface.

She said: "I know this is an imposition, Captain Dark. But when you didn't answer my letters, I knew this was the only thing to do." She removed her greatcoat and sat down, fumbling in her purse for a cigarette. He held a light towards her, and her first puff was also a sigh of relief.

"I did answer," he said quietly. "I answered your very first inquiry. I told you that I no longer charter my ship."

"It wasn't enough of an answer." Her voice shook.

"All right, then. Suppose you tell me the story."

"My name's Constance Miles," the woman said. "My husband is Peter Miles, and he is—was—a mining engineer working for the Gunsong Company. I needn't tell you about the Gunsong Company."

"No," Captain Dark said.

"I didn't want Peter to work for Gunsong; I hate everything they represent. But he wouldn't listen to me; six months ago, he accompanied a Gunsong expedition to the star system Virgo, presumably to do mining work on World V-5. The Gunsong ship returned thirty days ago." She paused. "But Peter wasn't aboard."

"What had happened to him?"

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"The official explanation was very pat," Mrs. Miles said bitterly. "They said he had been killed during a routine inspection, by an explosion that destroyed his body completely. That was convenient, of course; there was no corpse to bring back as unprofitable cargo."

"I'm sorry," Dark said gently.

"I was sorry, too. Sorry and angry."

"At Gunsong?"

"At Gunsong, and at myself. I won't hide the truth from you, Captain. Before Peter left on the flight, we had decided to divorce. We had some terrible fights, and I said some terrible things. I didn't want him to work for Gunsong; it's more than a company to me—"

"Dictator of the Universe," Dark said softly. "That's what its critics call it."

"And its critics have a way of leading short lives," Mrs. Miles said. "Peter felt that way once; but when they started making overtures, offering him more money than he was worth, he began to see things differently. I hated him for it, and I told him so. I warned him that a job with Gunsong had some gruesome fringe benefits—like death." Her voice choked off for a moment. "I didn't know how right I was . . ."

"So you think your husband's death wasn't accidental?"

"I *know* it wasn't."

"How?"

She reached into her purse and pulled out a strip of worn leather.

"I tore this from one of Peter's valises, the only one they returned to me. I'm surprised at their carelessness; perhaps they thought this inscription had another meaning."

She passed it across the desk. Dark looked at it, closing one eye. Then he handed it back.

"And now what do you want to do?" he said.

"I want to go to V-5. I want you to take me there, so I can learn for myself why they killed my husband."

"Quite a task for a lone woman, Mrs. Miles."

"I'll expect you to help me, of course. I know you've helped others. Everywhere I've turned, people have said, Jonathan Dark, Jonathan Dark, he's the man to help you. I couldn't ignore their advice, Captain Dark."

"Yet you know I've retired from active service?"

"Yes. But I hoped to make you reconsider your retirement. I know your sentiments about Gunsong; you've made them plain enough. Will you help me prove they killed Peter?"

The captain turned to the porthole-window of the room, his face thoughtful, his eyes distant.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "What you're asking is impossible."

There was a pause.

"Because you're blind?" the woman said.

Captain Dark, trembling, rose behind the desk like the

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wrathful figure of a latterday Moses. His mouth moved, but he couldn't speak. Then he clenched his fists and forced a whisper from his throat.

"How did you know? How could you tell?"

"Forgive me," Mrs. Miles said. "It wasn't your lack of cleverness, Captain. The way you look, the way you move, the way you lit my cigarette, read the inscription . . . it's an amazing performance; I can't begin to explain how you manage it. But there was something else . . ."

"What?" Jonathan Dark thundered. "What else?"

"Me, Captain Dark. Your reaction to me. To speak the honest truth, I'm a beautiful woman. The immodesty is necessary. I've seen the reaction of men to me, and the symptoms are always the same. But your eyes were dead, Captain."

He sat down, slowly.

"Just to be certain," the woman said, "I handed you that strip of leather with the inscription on the wrong side. You didn't turn it over."

"And what did it say?"

"It said—*Connie, you were right.*"

"There aren't many people who know my secret," Dark said wryly. "My servant, Skoggard, knows. The first mate, Sam Wilson, knows. The crewmen of my last voyage know, but they'd sooner cut out their tongues than reveal it. Not even the authorities know the real cause of my retirement, Mrs. Miles. By secluding myself here, I might have guarded it until my death."

"But why? Why keep the secret?"

"I don't know; I can't explain to myself. But when I was blinded two years ago, I dedicated my life to learning how to appear normal, to give the impression of sight. I have used whatever human and mechanical resources I could find. Like this, for instance." He rolled up his right sleeve. At first, the woman saw nothing; then she was aware of the hair-thin gold wire that circled the muscular arm. "This wire sheathes my body from head to foot, and connects to a power unit I carry on my person. At the approach of any solid object, the wire increases very slightly in temperature; I have learned to guage distances to the thousands of an inch through its sensitivity. Watch."

Captain Dark took a sharp-pointed bill-holder from the desk and placed it in front of him. Then he brought his open palm down swiftly. The woman gasped, but his hand stopped within a millimeter of the wicked point.

"How—how were you blinded?" she said.

"My blindness? That's another story. I'm more interested in yours now, Mrs. Miles."

She slumped in her chair, dejected. "What's the difference? You can't help me. I was a fool to insist this way—"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Miles, believe me."

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She rose and drew on her greatcoat. "Thank you for listening to me; I didn't realize you had problems of your own. I won't trouble you again."

Then she turned and left.

Skoggard, the servant, accompanied her down the rocky road towards the Soloboat at the pier. On the Widow's Walk, his sightless eyes turned out to sea, Captain Jonathan Dark listened to the gunning of its engine as it headed back for the mainland.

When Skoggard returned to the house, Captain Dark reached up and removed his left eye.

The servant watched him undo the clasp of the metal cylinder to which the eye was attached, and lift out the thin strip of film inside. He handed it to Skoggard, and then dropped into the desk chair in a listening posture.

"Describe them," he said.

"Very beautiful woman," Skoggard answered, his thin, fleshless face glowing. "Very black hair, almost blue. Large eyes, blue, a little wet-looking. She was crying."

"What else?"

"Good clothes, almost no jewelry. Big ring on left hand, initialled P.M. The other picture is just a strip of leather, nothing more."

"Yes," Captain Dark said. "All right, Skoggard."

"That all, Captain?"

"No, one more thing. Bring shaving equipment and get this filthy stuff off me." He indicated the gray-streaked beard.

"You want the whiskers off, Captain?"

"That's what I said. I want to be neat and clean-shaven. I'm going into the mainland tomorrow, and I want to look my best. The Commissioner of Space Licenses expects it."

"The Commisioner? You going to see him?"

"Of course," Dark said wryly. "I have to. If I want my license back."

The servant gasped.

"But, Captain—"

"That's all Skoggard," Dark said. "Bring the shaving things."

He slipped the eye back into his head.

Dr. Alfred Mahon, examining physician of the Space Licensing Commission, looked up with a cheerful smile on his round face as Captain Dark entered the office.

"Well!" he said. "Been a long time, Captain."

"Yes," Dark said ruefully, slipping into the chair beside the doctor's desk. "I thought I'd had enough of star-flight when I quit two years ago. But I guess it's in my blood."

"How's the *Empress?* All fixed after that trouble you had?"

"Shipshape. She's a fine old lady, Doc, you can't keep her down."

Mahon chuckled. "Okay, then. Let's see what sort of shape *you're* in."

Dark tensed as the doctor touched his arm, in preparation

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for a blood pressure examination.

"You're looking well," the captain said, with forced casualness. "Got a little sunburned, I see."

"Always happens when I go deep-sea fishing. Caught that big one, though, so it was worth it. What do you think of her, Captain?" He looked towards the wall, and Dark's head turned. His left eye closed briefly.

"That's a fine swordfish," he said.

The examination lasted half an hour.

"You're fine in all departments," the physician said amiably. "Now let's test that vision."

He slipped an Eyescope around the head of the Captain, and flicked the switch.

"Would you read the top line, Captain?"

"D," the spaceman said. "O, E, N. I. G."

"Next line, please."

"X, 6, P, 3, A, Y."

"And the next."

"T, V, U, 5, O, F."

"That's just fine," Dr. Mahon said.

A few minutes later, he put out his hand and Captain Dark shook it.

"Good voyage, Captain," he said.

"Thank you," Dark said soberly.

Skoggard, looking white-faced, opened the door of the car as he came out of the building. In the rear seat, Dark removed his camera eye, lifted the film from the cylinder, and passed it to his servant.

"It's a swordfish," Skoggard said.

Dark breathed relief. "Thank God. I was depending on what I heard: that Mahon had been deep-sea fishing all week end. But I took a chance on his catch."

"How was the examination?"

"My friends at the Commission gave me all the right answers. I'd like to see Mahon's face if he knew the truth—that it was a feat of memory, not vision." He laughed briefly, and then leaned back in the seat, silent until they reached their next destination.

At the door of Mrs. Peter Miles' apartment in Eastview Terrace, Captain Dark's hand sought out the buzzer. It was several moments before the woman answered, and her start of surprise was audible.

Dark smiled. "Do you recognize me, Mrs. Miles? I would have thought my lack of beard was a perfect disguise."

"I knew you," the woman said faintly. "Won't you come in, Captain?"

When the door shut behind him, Dark stiffened.

"Is there someone else here?"

"Yes." She looked over her shoulder at the man on the sofa. He rose and came forward. "This is Bill Conrad, an old friend of m-my husband. I've been talking to him about my plans. Bill, this is Captain Jonathan Dark."

Dark put out his hand, and the

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man shook it with cold fingers. He didn't notice the sudden droop of the spaceman's left eye.

"How much does Mr. Conrad know, Mrs. Miles?"

"Everything," the woman said. "I'm sorry, Captain—"

"You don't have to worry about me," the man said, frowning. "I won't tell anyone your precious secret. All I care about is helping Connie."

"That's my interest, too, Mr. Conrad. That's why I've renewed my space license, and have made arrangements for a voyage to V-5. I'm here to see if Mrs. Miles is willing to make the journey with a blind captain—"

"Of course!" the woman said joyfully. "Do you really mean it, Captain Dark?"

"Now wait a minute," Conrad said heatedly. "I can't let you take the chance, Connie. I'm sure Captain Dark knows what he's doing, but you have to consider your safety—"

"I've considered it," Dark said calmly. "I don't anticipate any trouble. I have a first mate I can rely on to be my eyes. If you still want to make the trip, Mrs. Miles, I can be ready within the month. There's a question of money, of course; that will have to be settled."

"Don't worry about the money," the man said. "I'll take care of that. But I won't let Connie go alone—"

"Are you inviting yourself, Mr. Conrad?"

"Yes!"

Dark rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I'd say you weigh about a hundred and ninety pounds, Mr. Conrad. That's a lot of extra weight for a starship the size of the *Empress*."

"How do you know what I weigh?"

"From the sound of your footstep. But if Mrs. Miles would feel better having you aboard, it's all right with me. I could use a spare hand. Mrs. Miles?"

"Yes, please," she whispered. "If Bill could come, I'd feel so much better."

"Very well," Dark said. "Then let's sit down and make the arrangements."

He emerged from the Eastview Terrace an hour later, and in the rear of the car, handed Skoggard the photo-strip from his eye camera. Skoggard squinted at it, and said, somewhat critically:

"Good-looking man. Movie star type. Sort of lean and pale-like, wavy blond hair. Who is he, Captain?"

"A passenger," Dark said.

Within three weeks, the photon-powered *Empress*, looking trim and spaceworthy and younger than her fourteen years was raised to the launching pad at the Alamo Spaceport outside of Houston, Texas. Captain Jonathan Dark, accompanied by his first mate, Lt. Sam Wilson, made the customary tour of inspection; not even the ground crew suspected that the eyes which scanned the ship saw nothing but darkness. Three

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days before the end of the month, the flight office arranged the final details on the voyage, all appropriate records being forwarded to the Central Spaceflight Information office in Washington. Two days later, the crew boarded. Captain: Jonathan L. Dark, Independent Starfleet. First mate and senior officer, Lt. Samuel Wilson. General crewman, Boris Skoggard. Passengers: Mrs. Peter Miles, Mr. Bill Conrad.

The journey had begun.

The atmosphere was tense inside the control cabin as orders for blast-off were radioed from the tower. But Captain Dark, as sure of hand and command as ever, guided the starship towards escape velocity and into the heavens. Four hours later, the speed of the *Empress* doubled and redoubled again and again, starspeed had been established. From that point on, there was only watchfulness and waiting.

A quietus seemed to have fallen on the captain; it was as if he had added loss of speech to his lack of sight. The others adopted his mood, but Mrs. Peter Miles soon tired of the silence. On the third day, she drew Wilson, the first mate, aside, and asked:

"How long have you been with Captain Dark, Lieutenant?"

"About seven years. I flew every voyage with him after we met, up until the time he—"

"Went blind?"

"Yes. Only he didn't *go* blind." Wilson, a big, genial man with boyish freckles, flushed. "He was *made* blind, that's what."

"How?"

"They commandeered his ship, *this* ship. They just took it over one day, just as if he hadn't worked and sweated for it all his life. They put on their own crew, and made him take a lot of risks that shouldn't be taken—no siree, never—"

"Who did?" Mrs. Miles said.

"*Them.* The damned Department of Interstellar Development, that phoney government agency that Gunsong controls—"

"But could they do that? Just take his ship away?"

"They could, and did," Wilson said angrily. "It was during the Scorpio uranium strike. They said it was in the public interest; then they practically wrecked the *Empress* on their damned exploratory trips. That's how it happened—on a return flight to Earth. The Number Six rocket gave out and sent the ship into a cockeyed orbit that headed it right for the sun. Captain Dark figured the only way to save her was to get outside and make repairs; we were so close to the sun that it burned off his protective gear, burned the eyes right out of his head. He was lucky to stay alive. They had him hospitalized for eight months; Gunsong paid all the expenses. Sweet of them, wasn't it?"

"How terrible!" Mrs. Miles said. "No wonder he hates Gunsong so much—"

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"It's not a company," Wilson growled. "It's the devil himself . . ."

A week later, inexplicably, the atmosphere changed. There was a sudden relaxation among the crew; the tensions which had marked the beginning of the voyage vanished as their destination grew closer. Eventually, the only one aboard the *Empress* who remained sullen and aloof was Conrad.

"You're making a terrible mistake," he told the woman. "I know how you feel about Peter, and I know this is more of a penance than anything else. But you have to think of yourself, Connie."

"I *am* thinking of myself," she said, her eyes fixed on the jeweled vastness framed inside the ship's viewplate. "I couldn't live with myself if I didn't attempt to learn the truth. I feel as if Peter's death is partly my fault—"

"That's stupid," Conrad said bluntly. "Peter was a hotheaded little idiot, you know that. But even if you *did* learn his death wasn't accidental, what would you do about it?"

"I don't know," the woman whispered.

They looked up to see Captain Dark watching them thoughtfully. For a moment, both forgot that he saw nothing.

In another week, they saw the bright sun of Virgo. And a few days later, the ship engines braked to normal flightspeed, they witnessed the ascent of World V-5 in the viewplate.

The atmospheric clouds were thick around the small, moon-sized world. As the ship's nose cut through the cumulus, they saw the murky black terrain interlaced by swift-moving rivers, and then the ever-widening rings of gray dots which were the Earth settlements. Captain Dark radioed in for landing instructions, and then skillfully, with the first mate's eyes on the gauges, brought the starship safely to landfall. They had already been briefed on what they might expect on the planet: a thin, but breathable atmosphere, which they would supplement merely by daily intake of oxygen capsules; a sunless, slate-gray sky and a temperature that never varied from 64 degrees; little vegetation, much industry, and no life except Man.

It was Man who greeted them first when they emerged from the ship: a burly man with an unshaven face and an unfriendly mouth.

"I'm Johannson," he said. "Which one of you's the captain?"

Dark stepped forward. "I am. Captain Jonathan Dark, Independent Starfleet. What's your duty, Mr. Johannson?" he asked with authority.

"Chief Overseer, Gunsong Mining. You'll have to report to headquarters and register your ship and passengers." His eyes were inspecting Constance Miles, and in a manner that

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made Bill Conrad growl softly in his throat.

"We'll make our ship our headquarters," Dark said crisply. "And we'll want to see the Earth Ambassador just as soon as we've registered."

"Sure," Johannson said. "Just follow me."

Dark hesitated, and then, with his first mate at his side, followed their official greeter into the shack.

Two hours later, Captain Dark had his interview with Martin Deskey, Ambassador from Earth.

Deskey was a gray-haired, frowning man in his early fifties, but Dark needed no eyephoto to picture him in his mind. He had met Deskey before, on other worlds, and knew the itinerant Ambassador as a man of dyspeptic temper and unshakeable integrity.

"What's the story, Captain?" Deskey asked sharply. "This can't be a social visit, can it? Who's the woman?"

"The woman is Mrs. Peter Miles," Dark said. "Name familiar?"

"No."

"Her husband worked here not long ago, as a mining engineer. He was killed in some sort of explosion."

"A lot of men are killed here. We have thirty-five thousand men working for Gunsong at the mines alone. There are fifteen thousand other workers. Add in their families, and you get a total of almost a hundred thousand population. Expect me to remember one?"

"I was hoping you might. Or at least know someone I could talk to."

"You'll have to go to Gunsong on it; we have nothing to do with such matters at the Embassy. I'd suggest you talk to Johannson, the chief overseer. Have you met him yet?"

"Yes; he's a pig."

"Well, then go over his head if you can. See the big cheese; Charles Cleaves is his name; he's in charge of the entire Gunsong operation. But I warn you—he's not a talkative man."

"I didn't think he would be." Dark stood up and held out his hand. "Thanks, Mr. Deskey."

The Ambassador shook it, and then said gruffly: "Nice to see you again, Dark."

"Nice to see you," the captain said.

For the next five frustrating hours, Captain Dark, accompanied by Wilson, tried to make contact with the elusive Mr. Cleaves. Wearied of the effort, finally, he returned to the *Empress*.

"Where've you been?" Conrad said testily. "We've been like monkeys in a zoo all day. If that oaf Johannson doesn't stop hanging around here—"

"Johannson?" Dark said.

"Yes. When do we get out of here, Captain?"

"I don't know. When we get what we came for. Mrs. Miles—"

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"Yes, Captain?"

"Are you sure there's nothing else you can tell me about your husband? I've questioned a dozen Gunsong officials, and nobody seems to know a thing about him."

"Of course," the woman said bitterly. "He's someone they want to forget."

"It's hopeless," Conrad said. "Don't you see that? Gunsong owns this planet—"

"Earth owns this planet, mister!" Dark turned such a ferocious gaze on him that Conrad shrank from its sightless glare. "Gunsong has a mining concession, and that's all."

"Look," Wilson said. "Here's Happy Boy now."

Through the viewplate, they saw the burly figure of Johannson advancing towards the ship. He came up the ladder, grinned at Connie Miles, and then grimaced at Conrad. But his face was blank when he addressed the captain.

"I heard you were lookin' for Mr. Cleaves, Captain?"

"That's right."

"What a coincidence," Johannson leered. "Mr. Cleaves' been lookin' for you. If you follow me, I'll take you to him."

"All right." Dark hesitated, and then said: "I'll be just a few minutes; there's something I have to take care of first. Skoggard—"

"Yes, sir?" The servant came to his side.

"I want to see you in my cabin."

They entered the captain's quarters. He whispered a curt order, and the servant produced a slim metal case from the files. Carefully, Dark removed both of his artificial eyes, and replaced them with the strangely glistening orbs that lay within the case. Their fire was dulled once inserted, and only the closest inspection would reveal that there had been a change in the captain's expression.

When he returned to the ship's control room, he said:

"All right, Mr. Johannson. I'm ready."

The central offices of the Gunsong company was easily the most impressive structure on the small planet. It rose four stories high, and its stone façade gleamed with mica highlights.

The overseer left Captain Dark at the doorway of an office on the second floor. He sat calmly in the reception foyer, waiting for admittance.

He was kept outside a deliberate twenty minutes; then Cleaves opened the door and said:

"Come in, Captain Dark."

He sensed the impressiveness of the office through every nerve. The carpet was thickpiled under his boot; the desk felt like silken-smooth mahogany when he touched it. There was the smell of expensive cigar smoke in the room.

Dark went right to the point.

"I'm here in behalf of Mrs.

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Peter Miles," he said. "Her husband was a mining engineer employed by your company. He was reported killed in an explosion. However, your officials seem to be either very forgetful or unusually reluctant; nobody even recalls his name."

"But I do," Cleaves said, in a smiling voice. "Mr. Miles was a brilliant fellow; we were all distressed at his accident." The voice came closer, and Dark knew he was leaning forward. "But I still can't understand the reason for this pilgrimmage, Captain. Unless you suspect dirty work."

"What makes you say that?"

"I know about you, Captain; you're a famous man. Champion of the oppressed, that sort of thing."

"I'm flattered," Dark said dryly. "Then I take it you corroborate the story of Peter Miles' accident?"

"Of course. Unless you have evidence to the contrary—"

Dark rose slowly from the chair.

"Look at me," he said.

"What?"

"Look at me, Cleaves."

"What's got into you?"

"What do you see in my eyes?"

"Eyes?" Cleaves' voice trembled suddenly. "What's the matter with them? Why do you—"

"Look carefully, Cleaves."

"They're so strange . . . so bright . . ."

"Come closer," Dark said.

He felt the wires warming on his body as the official approached. He put out his hand and touched the man's shoulder.

"Look deeply, Cleaves. Deeply . . ."

He heard the protracted sigh, and he knew that the effect had been successful.

"Sit down," Dark said brusquely.

"Yes . . ."

"Now you will answer my questions as fully as you can. You will tell me everything you know, without hesitation or fear."

"Yes," Cleaves said.

"Was Peter Miles killed in an accident?"

"No."

"Was he murdered?"

"Yes."

"Was he murdered at your instruction?"

"Yes." The voice quavered. "No! Orders from headquarters . . . Gunsong's personal order . . . I merely carried it out . . ."

"Why was he killed, Cleaves?"

"I'm not sure. I think . . . because he knew. Because he found out . . . about the Charcoal Mines . . ."

"Charcoal Mines? What are they?"

"That's what they're called. But they're not . . . they're subterranean mines . . . incredible . . ."

"Speak up!" Dark commanded. "What sort of mines are these?"

"Diamond," Cleaves gasped. "Largest diamond mines in the universe . . . filled with diaman-

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tiferous blue ground . . . enormous crystals, biggest I've ever seen . . . more diamonds than the whole universe knows . . ."

"Was that why he was killed? Because he found out, and Gunsong didn't want the story spread?"

"No. He had to know. He was brought in to analyze the extraction problems . . . him and a lot of others . . . they all knew."

"Then why was Peter Miles killed?"

"I guess . . . because he knew about . . . the Holiday . . ."

"What Holiday?"

Behind Captain Dark, the office door slammed open. He whirled, and heard an excited voice saying:

"Mr. Cleaves! Trouble at that starship—"

Dark cursed under his breath. Then he leaned towards the ear of the hypnotized official, and whispered: "You won't remember this, Cleaves. You'll forget our entire conversation. Now wake up and answer this man."

Cleaves groaned, and then shot to his feet.

"Trouble? What kind of trouble?"

"There's been a shooting. Some kind of fight between Johannson and that guy in the ship—"

Dark turned on him. "Who was shot?"

"Conrad," the man said. "Johannson was making a pass at the woman, I think. That's how it started."

Cleaves grunted. "See what your curiosity bought you, Captain? Come on—let's go see how bad it is."

They reached the ship ten minutes later, and found it ringed by curious spectators. Dark pushed his way through the crowd, and Wilson, the first mate, came to his side.

"Bad business," Wilson said. "Johannson got a little too familiar with Mrs. Miles, and Conrad pulled a gun. Johannson was faster than he was, though—he shot Conrad in the leg. Busted his knee-cap, I think."

"Where is he now?"

"A Gunsong ambulance 'copter picked him up a few minutes ago and brought him to the hospital. From what I heard, he'll be stuck there for a month—"

Dark sighed. "As if we didn't have enough problems. I'll go see Ambassador Deskey and find out the score. How is Mrs. Miles?"

"Pretty shaken up. I got a feeling it was more than palship between her and Conrad. Maybe you better go talk to her, Captain."

"I will."

He found her lying across the bunk in her cabin, in a strange silent mood.

"Mrs. Miles?"

"Yes, Captain. I'm all right."

"I'm sorry about what happened, but I hear that Mr. Conrad will be all right. And about your husband—I think we're making some progress—"

"I don't care about progress," she said dully. "I want to go

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home, Captain. As soon as Bill is well enough, I want to return to Earth."

"But the job's not done—"

"I'll pay your fee, Captain. But I've changed my mind. I don't care what happened to Peter; I don't think I ever really cared. I want some happiness, Captain Dark, more than anything. I want to marry again."

"Conrad?"

"Yes. The whole expedition was a mistake. Even if they did kill Peter, it was a chance he took himself. He knew what kind of people they are . . . his eyes were open . . ."

Captain Dark's own sightless eyes blinked.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Miles said.

"It's all right," Dark said gently. "We'll do what you want, Mrs. Miles. We'll go home."

Deskey was growling like an angry lion when Dark entered the Ambassador's office.

"I know, I know," he said. "You're going to file a protest about Johannson. Well, don't worry about it; we've done it already. He's under arrest now—"

"What will happen to him?"

"Gunsong will act swiftly, I promise you. Especially now."

"Why now?"

"This stupid Holiday of theirs is coming up. They won't want anything to interfere with that."

Dark tried to conceal his surprise.

"What Holiday?"

"Haven't you heard about it? The Gunsong Company's declared a mass holiday for their key executives. There'll be two or three thousand of them taking off for Earth next week. Damnedest thing I ever heard of."

"What's the idea?"

"Don't ask me. It's some kind of screwy policy, I guess. They'll be massing a fleet of Gunsong supply and transport starships in the next few days. If you're planning to leave before then, I'd suggest you start getting the permits right now."

"We can't leave," Dark said, standing up. "Not with Conrad in the hospital. And I've got some unfinished business here."

He found his own way back to the central office building, but this time, the elusive Mr. Cleaves wasn't available. He cursed his luck and returned to the *Empress*. In his cabin, he removed the hypnotic eyes and replaced them in their case, then installed another pair in his head. He was weary; he stretched out on his bunk and closed the lids over the unseeing orbs. In a few minutes, he was asleep.

The dream was as short and explosive as a burst of gunfire. He was at the controls of the *Empress*, heading the starship for the sun. He screamed, but he couldn't halt the juggernaut. The great fiery globe beckoned him inexorably, hot tongues licking at the skin of the vessel. Then he knew Hell.

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He opened his eyes, aware of a silence too deep and enveloping.

"Sam," he said softly.

There was no answer.

"Lieutenant Wilson!" He sat up on the bunk. The wires on his skin were cool, cooler than they should have been. He stood up, and put out his hands, seeking a surface.

There was none.

"Sam! Skoggard!" Captain Dark shouted.

Only silence.

He walked forward hesitantly, the sweat forming a film on his face and neck. The wires failed to respond, and he knew he was in the middle of vastness. For the first time in his life, he felt truly *blind.*

"Is anybody here?" he cried.

The faintest of sounds came from somewhere behind him. He whirled towards it gratefully, hungry for some sign of life and substance.

The sound came closer. He went to his knees and touched the ground. It felt smooth as glass to his touch. He stood up again, and almost imperceptibly, the wires circling his body warmed.

"Who's there?" Captain Dark thundered.

Now he recognized the sound. It was footsteps. They were light steps, that could only have been produced by a child or a very small woman.

The wires grew hotter.

"Are you all right, Captain?" the voice said.

It was a woman's voice, so feeble that it was barely audible. He guessed the age of the speaker, and it was surely past seventy.

"Who are you?" Dark said. "How did I get here?"

"You were brought here," the woman answered. "At my request, Captain. As you slept, your starship was filled with a non-toxic vapor which brought unconsciousness to you and your passengers. The others are quite all right, I assure you; I doubt if they have yet awakened to be aware of your disappearance."

"Disappearance? Where have you brought me?"

The woman coughed politely.

"You will excuse me, Captain. Our family has made a great fuss about privacy for a hundred years. I cannot betray the name of the world you're on, if you don't mind."

"Another world?"

"Yes. You were carried off by one of our ships, so that I could visit with you."

"And who are *you?"*

"I am Madame Helen Gunsong," the woman said.

The short hairs prickled on the back of the captain's neck. Then he recovered his poise, and said, commandingly:

"I want to speak to your husband, madame."

A pause.

"That is impossible, Captain."

"I've looked forward to meeting him for a long time. If I could have that privilege—"

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"*No* one has that privilege, Captain. Except his Maker. My husband, Arnold Gunsong, has been dead for sixteen years. There are no other Gunsongs except myself and my son. If you have anything to say to Gunsong, Captain—" Her voice took an amused tone. "You can say it to me."

Dark tried to cover his confusion.

"You mean *you* run this company?"

"Yes, I run it. Run it well, Captain. Ran it well since my husband's death. Need I boast of how successful we have been?"

"No," Dark said harshly. "Then what did you want me for? Why did you kidnap me?"

"Surely you know the answer to that, Captain."

"No, I don't."

"Then let me tell you. Your little expedition has been no secret to me; I knew of it the moment you renewed your license to make the journey. I know of your inquiries about Peter Miles on World V-5. I know your curiosity regarding his death. More important, I know about your interesting session with Mr. Cleaves—"

"You can't!" Dark exploded.

"I can and do. All of Gunsong's official conversations are recorded, Captain; it's a wise precaution of ours. It was simple to learn of your hypnotic effort. I must congratulate you on it—it was brilliantly done."

"Then you know that the conversation was never concluded," Dark said. "You know that we were interrupted before Mr. Cleaves could tell me what I really wanted to know—"

"Yes," the woman said.

"Will you finish the story for me, Mrs. Gunsong?"

She chuckled. "You're reputed to be a clever man, Captain Dark. Suppose you finish it for me?"

"All right. Then here's what I think. I think Peter Miles was killed at your order, because he learned something he wasn't supposed to know. He knew that the Gunsong Holiday had a grim purpose—"

"What purpose, Captain?"

"To protect the financial interests of the Gunsong Company in the diamond trade. Gunsong wanted its key officials off the planet, because something unpleasant was going to happen to it—"

"Brilliant!" the woman applauded.

"You knew that the Charcoal Mines on World V-5 weren't a blessing—they were a threat. A threat to the stability of the universe's diamond market, a market which Gunsong has always controlled . . ."

"One of the chief sources of our income," Madame Gunsong said amiably. "Go on, Captain. And how were we to cope with this threat?"

"By destroying the planet. Destroying it deliberately, but pretending it was another 'accident'—a cosmic accident which

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Gunsong couldn't prevent. No World V-5—no Charcoal Mines—no debased diamond values. Is that it, Madame Gunsong? Is that what it's all about?"

The woman chuckled. "What a pity, Captain. Arnold would have enjoyed knowing you; you're just the kind of clever rascal he liked. Yes, we are going to destroy V-5. It is a business necessity—"

"And the thousands of people who will be left there? The men and the families? Is it a business necessity to destroy them, too?"

"I'm afraid so, Captain. Surely you can see how impossible it would be to evacuate the entire planet. It would be an admission that the destruction was man-made . . . No, Captain. I'm afraid some sacrifice is entailed."

Dark tingled with hatred.

"You're a butcher, Madame Gunsong."

"And you're a fool, Captain. A blind fool. In more ways than one." She laughed.

"What do you mean?" Dark said cautiously.

"Are you still pretending, Captain? I know your precious secret. I've known it from the beginning. You're blind, Captain Dark. Such an appropriate name! You've tried to hide the fact from the world, but you cannot hide it from me. But don't worry," she crooned. "It really doesn't matter any more. Because you're going to a greater Darkness, Captain. A permanent one."

He took a step towards her.

"Keep your distance, Captain!" She spoke sharply. "I'm not your executioner. That's hireling work."

The wires on his body cooled as the woman moved away.

Dark stumbled after her, helplessly. All the mechanical resources, all his training, were to no avail. He was a prisoner in a cage without bars, on a vast open plain without beginning or end. He ran in circles like a blinded insect, until his strength failed. Then he sank to the glass-smooth ground and waited hopelessly for death.

A few minutes later, he was aware of a Presence.

He looked up, and the voice said:

"On your feet, blind man."

He rose slowly, letting the warm wires on his body guide him to the source of the sound.

"Get up, blind man. I want to see your face."

It was a man's voice, hard and cold as a bullet.

He took a step towards him.

"Stay where you are," the voice commanded.

"What's your name?" Dark whispered.

"What difference does it make?"

"I want to know your name, executioner. So I can report you to the Devil."

The man laughed. Then he came closer.

"I'll shoot for the head, blind

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man. It will be quick. You can thank me for that."

The wires of his body went hot as the metal of the gun neared him.

"Good-bye, Captain," the man said.

"Good-bye," Dark said, and with a prayer, tensed the muscles of his right eye and fired the single bullet in the chamber deep within his eye socket. It struck its target, and the man shouted in pain and shocked surprise, his own weapon falling to the ground with a clatter. Then he stumbled forward, and fell at Captain Dark's feet.

Dark bent swiftly to him, and felt for heartbeats. They were faint, but there.

"Can you talk?"

"Yes . . ." the man said hoarsely.

"Then talk now, or I'll finish you. What world is this?"

"I don't know."

Dark's fingers found his throat.

"I swear! I swear!" the wounded man cried. "None of us know . . . brought here in secrecy . . . don't know . . ."

"All right. Then how long have I been here?"

"Four days."

"Four!" The captain cursed. "Has the Holiday begun? The Holiday on V-5?"

"Yes, yes . . ."

"When will it happen? When will the explosion take place?"

'Today. Soon. When the madame gives the command."

"Where am I now? What place is this?"

"It's a landing field . . . six miles from the Manor . . . where the Madame lives . . ." His body made a convulsion, and Dark said:

"Are you all right?"

There was no answer. He found the man's pulse. It was silent.

Dark straightened, and then searched the smooth terrain for his fallen weapon. He found it at last: a heat blaster with a hair trigger. He dropped the gun into his pocket.

Then he began walking.

Thirty minutes later, he heard a whirring over his head. Not fifty yards from him, a 'copter was descending. Then the light footsteps were moving towards him again.

"You're an amazing man, Captain," Madame Gunsong said admiringly.

He drew the gun and pointed it in her direction.

"Don't be foolish," she said, in a smiling voice. "I'm better protected than you think, Captain. I could have you turned into a pillar of ash by the flick of my eyelash."

"Then why don't you?"

"Because a man of your courage deserves more than that, Captain. For one thing, I think you deserve the truth."

"The truth?"

"You were drawn into this affair because of a man named Peter Miles. I think you should know his real story before the

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end comes. It's only fair to you."

"You mean there's something I don't know?"

She chuckled. "A great deal, Captain. You see, Mr. Miles wasn't that brilliant a mining engineer, Captain. It wasn't his knowledge which led to his destruction. It was something quite different, and quite personal."

"What do you mean, personal?"

"It's a pity you're blind, Captain; a pity that you never saw Peter's wife. She's a remarkably beautiful woman."

"So I've heard."

"So beautiful, in fact, and so desirable, that she was wooed by my own son. He wanted her more than he has wanted anything on Earth, and as his mother, I wanted his happiness more than anything on Earth. Even if he had disavowed his father and myself and his birthright . . ."

"I don't understand."

"John was always a headstrong boy, and something of an idealist. When he was old enough to reason, he decided that the name of Gunsong was an abomination in the sight of God. So he left his home and his family behind. Then he met Constance Miles, and fell in love. But Constance Miles had a husband, and she was loyal to him . . ."

The light was dawning, even in Captain Dark's blind eyes.

"Then that's why you offered him work on V-5. And that's why you had him killed, to free his wife for your son."

"A mother's devotion," the old woman simpered. "A gesture that John would never have condoned. But a gesture which has left him free to marry the woman he loves . . . Do you think I'm such a butcher now, Captain?"

"Yes!" His finger itched on the hair trigger of the gun. "But I want to know something else. What name did your son use? Was it Conrad? Bill Conrad?"

"No," Madame Gunsong said. "It was Don Allen . . ." Her voice was suddenly uncertain. "Why? Why do you ask?"

"Then your efforts have been for nothing, Madame. Because Mrs. Miles is in love with a man named Bill Conrad . . . a man now in the hospital of World V-5 . . ."

"You're crazy!" she snapped. "It's not possible. Constance Miles loved my son . . ."

Dark reached into a narrow pocket of his suit, and extracted a strip of film.

"Look at this, madame. And tell me who it is."

She took it from his hand. After a moment, she exploded: "But that's John! That's my son!"

Dark sneered. "Your spy network has broken down, Madame Gunsong. Your son is calling himself Bill Conrad now, and he accompanied us on the journey from Earth to V-5."

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"I was told he was a crewman—"

"You were told wrong. He's Constance Miles' lover, and the man she wants to marry. He got into a fight with one of your underlings, and took a bullet in the leg for his troubles." He advanced towards her. "Where is the *Empress*, madame? Where's my ship?"

"It—it's gone. I commandeered it, took it off V-5 with the others—"

"Then Mrs. Miles, and my crewmen, are safe?"

"Yes!"

"But Bill Conrad is still in the hospital, isn't he?"

"He must be! But I've already given the order! They've started the reactors—"

"Then you've killed your own son, Madame Gunsong."

"No!" she said wildly. "Quick—follow me to the 'copter." She took his arm, and led him to the waiting machine as swiftly as her age would permit.

The automatic pilot brought them swiftly to the rooftop of the Manor. Dark followed the old woman, secure now in the solid presence of walls and ceilings, until they reached the broadcasting unit which kept the Gunsong company in touch with its far-flung divisions.

She gave hurried orders to the men at the transmitters, while Dark stood by and listened.

It was over an hour before contact with V-5 was established, an hour with agonizingly long minutes.

Then the answer came.

The man at the transmitter whirled to face them.

"It's all right," he said briskly. "They were able to halt the chain reaction in time. There's no blow-up."

"Thank God," Captain Dark whispered.

"John . . ." Madame Gunsong said.

A Gunsong employee stepped towards them.

"Madame Gunsong? Do you wish this man made prisoner?"

"No," the woman said wearily. "I want him released. I want him returned to his ship, and his friends. And I want the man called Bill Conrad removed from the V-5 hospital and brought here . . ."

"Wait," Dark said. "I have a better idea for you, madame. I suggest you go to see him."

"You're right," the old woman said. "I'll go to him, Captain." She touched his arm. "Thank you, young man. I haven't met your like since Arnold's death . . ."

"I'm not flattered, madame."

She chuckled. "No, I suppose you're not. But I want you to know that V-5 will be safe. I think Gunsong will get out of the diamond business . . . There are plenty of other opportunities, Captain."

"No doubt. I wish you bad luck in all of them, madame."

"You *are* like Arnold," Madame Gunsong said.

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Skoggard stood in the doorway of the Widow's Walk, afraid to disturb the captain's rest. Finally, Dark stirred and turned to him.

"What is it?" he said testily. "You're panting like a dog, Skoggard."

"I—I'm sorry, Captain. I know you wanted to be alone. I *told* the man that you weren't seeing anybody these days, but he practically knocked me down—"

"What man?"

"The man at the pier. He said he had a terrible problem, and needed your ship in the worst way. I told him that you just weren't chartering your ship, even if you did make the V-5 journey—"

"Where is he now?"

"On the dock; I wouldn't let him come to the house, Captain. Just as you ordered. I knew you wouldn't want to be bothered, that you wanted some peace and quiet . . ."

Dark got to his feet, and chuckled.

"You know something, Skoggard? Sometimes I think *you're* the blind man."

And he went down the rocky path to meet his visitor.

THE END

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PROPHECY, INC.

By ROG PHILLIPS

ILLUSTRATOR MARTINEZ

Are next week's newspapers already printed? Are the momentous events of the next ten years already ancient history somewhere beyond range of our senses? Author Phillips says —could be.

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THE frosted glass of the door bore the legend, *Dr. M. G. Freehurst & Associates,* and the number *1428-36.* Earl Baker, tall, dark-haired, and slim, in neatly tailored dark suit, hesitated briefly, then pushed open the door and went in.

There was a small, luxuriously furnished waiting room, and a sliding glass panel behind which he could see the rich auburn hair of a girl.

Earl glanced at his wristwatch. "I'm supposed to have an appointment with Dr. Freehurst for three o'clock," he said. "And I seem to be right on time."

The girl consulted a list. "You are Mr. Baker?" she asked. "Please be seated. Dr. Freehurst will see you in a few moments."

Earl Baker glanced at his watch again and frowned. "I didn't request this appointment," he said. "Dr. Freehurst did. I'm rather busy . . ."

"*Please* wait," the girl said. "Something unexpected came up but the doctor will be able to see you in just a little while. Believe me, it's for your best interests."

"My name's Linda Parnell."

"Okay, Linda, maybe I'll wait. But what's it about? I can't figure it out. I get a call from this Dr. Freehurst saying it's a matter of life and death—*my* life and death—for me to be here. Frankly, I think it's some new selling technique. I probably wouldn't have come at all, but being a business man myself, I'm always interested in new sales techniques."

"I'll have to let Dr. Freehurst tell you what it's about," Linda said. "I can assure you, though, that it isn't a new selling technique."

"Then what is it?" Earl Baker asked bluntly. "The name on the door doesn't tell anything. What do you deal in? And don't tell me you don't know!" He smiled to take the hostility out of his remark.

A buzzer sounded under the desk. "Excuse me," Linda said, pushing down the toggle pin of an intercom.

"Has Mr. Baker come in?" a pleasantly deep male voice asked. "Send him in if he has."

"You may go in now," Linda said, smiling her relief.

Earl Baker nodded but made no motion to move toward the door marked private. Instead he repeated his question. "What do you deal in here?"

"Prophecy," Linda said. "Specialized prophecy."

Earl Baker blinked, then laughed. "Look into your crystal ball while I'm in there and see if I'm taking you to dinner tonight," he said as he turned away and went toward the inner door.

Max Freehurst was a small man with a bulging forehead and thin blond hair combed neatly back. He wore a slightly harassed expression covered by a forced smile as he came out from behind his desk to shake hands with Earl Baker. While they shook hands he looked up at the taller

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man's face with a thoughtful, blinking intentness.

"Please sit down, Mr. Baker," he said. "I have a great deal of explaining to do and you will probably have some questions to ask. First, I asked you to come here because all the indications are that you will be murdered shortly, and we would like to prevent that if possible. To do so we must have your cooperation."

"Murdered?" Earl Baker said. "Me?" He sat down slowly, studying Max Freehurst's face. "You're joking! Uh, when?"

Max went around his desk and sat down. "Two weeks from today," he said. "Now, before you ask more questions, please listen to what I have to say."

"All right," Earl said, sitting back and leisurely lighting a cigarette.

"We, my associates and I," Max Freehurst began, "have a definite and scientific technique for looking into the future. I will go into it later, but first I want to give you a picture of how the future works from the present. Unlike the past, the future is by no means fixed and unalterable. It can be changed, and is being changed all the time. New factors enter into a picture and alter it.

"There is a geometric progression of uncertainty involved whose underlying principles are still unknown to us. Let me give you an example. Today it is quite certain that it will start raining outside at three thirty-two." He glanced at his watch. "Twenty-five minutes from now. You will be able to look out my window here and see it start to rain right on schedule. Yet two weeks ago this was quite uncertain. There was a ten percent chance it would rain, and the time was unknown. A week ago there was a seventy percent chance it would rain, but the time indicated was later in the evening. Three days ago the chances of rain were eighty percent, and the time it would start outside these windows was forty percent settled at three thirty-two, which made it a practical certainty." Max Freehurst smiled. "That's one reason I wanted to have you over here at three, so you could see a demonstration of prophecy in action. It is important that you actually see it."

"How does it work?" Earl Baker asked.

"By a form of hypnosis, aided by certain new drugs. We first used these methods to send a subject back into his past in order to get at psychoses. We supposed, naturally, that we were merely tapping the subject's memory, but little things developed that led us to believe even total recall wouldn't explain all that came out. Finally, by a method of confusing the subject as to what time is the present, we were able to make him *recall* the future. Once we were able to do this, the rest followed. Today we have a team of fifty full-time subjects who range over the coming few weeks all the time. We coordinate what they bring back,

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the agreements and disagreements about what happens."

"As simple as that," Earl Baker said.

"Not simple," Max Freehurst said, his troubled expression returning. "There are complications. We try to limit the excursions to the first few weeks of the unrolling future so that no subject under hypnosis risks going past the point in time of his death, and we try to keep a cross check going to avoid that, but sometimes . . ." With an effort he forced himself away from whatever troubled him.

"Today is May fourteenth," Max said. "The newspapers of May twenty-ninth carry the headlines of your murder on the twenty-eighth, two weeks from today."

"Who kills me?" Earl Baker said, grinning, but with worried lights in his brown eyes.

Dr. Freehurst shrugged his shoulders. "The papers state that an arrest will be made within twenty-four hours, but they don't according to the next day's papers. That's why I contacted you and asked you to come here to my office. What we would like to do is find out the identity of the killer—potential killer at this point—and work to prevent it."

"But if it's going to happen how can you change that?" Earl Baker asked.

"We are a new factor entering the picture," Max Freehurst said. "The information I am giving you is a new factor. If your knowing someone will try to kill you on the twenty-eighth is enough of a factor to prevent your murder, then tomorrow morning's hypnotic session will show no news of your death in the papers of the twenty-eighth. Do you have any notion of who might want to kill you?"

"Not the slightest!" Earl Baker said.

"Nor any motive?"

"None." Earl Baker frowned in thought. "Oh, I could conjure up reasons. How was I killed?"

"You were shot. Two shots, one through the head and one through the chest."

"Where was I?" Earl Baker said, his voice showing his growing nervousness.

Max Freehurst smiled without humor. "Either at your office or just after getting out of your car at home or at some unknown place, with your body dumped from a moving car in Franklin Park. All three show equal appearance in the papers as seen from yesterday." . . .

Earl Baker said nothing. Freehurst broke the silence.

"I have a feeling for these things," he said quietly. "I think your death at an unknown place derives from our entering the picture, and that tomorrow the other two methods or places will disappear as possibilities. The pattern of shifting possibility goes like that. Probably your body will be reported as being found in several different places, but in all cases dumped from a car after you're dead."

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"If this is all baloney . . ." Earl Baker said threateningly.

"It isn't," Max said. "What happened day before yesterday?"

"I don't know. Why?" Earl Baker said.

"It seems probable the factor determining your murder came into existence then. Before that, the newspapers of the twenty-ninth had nothing about you in them at all."

"I can't imagine what it would be," Earl Baker said.

"Look!" Max Freehurst said, pointing to the window. "That pigeon. It's twenty-eight minutes after three. That pigeon will remain there until it starts to rain. Then a gust of wind will rattle the window, startling it, and it will fly away."

Both men became silent, watching the pigeon, as the minute hand of the clock on the wall approached 3:32.

At 3:31 the pigeon cocked its head coyly as though aware of its place in destiny, made as though to spread its wings and fly away, upsetting prophecy—and changed its mind.

At ten seconds before 3.32 the first raindrop fell, then another, then a dozen.

The window rattled loudly. The pigeon flew away.

"What happened day before yesterday?" Dr. Freehurst said.

Earl Baker pulled his attention from the spring cloudburst outside the window. "What?" he said vaguely, then, with a visible effort at concentration, "lots of things, I suppose. What are you looking for?"

"I don't know," Max said. "Maybe things like changing your will, telling your wife you were going to divorce her, a fight with your business partner. Big, crucial things that could start a murder motivation in someone. Or little things. It's quite possible that what happened day before yesterday didn't happen in your presence, like the potential killer learning from someone else the thing that makes him or her want to kill you. It could even be something like a business deal that won't develop a murder motive for someone until the last day."

"Hmm," Earl Baker said slowly. "That was the twelfth, Tuesday. I'm not married. Divorced three years ago. My wife remarried. Nothing there. Changed my will after she remarried, leaving everything to my sister in Montana. Nothing there."

"Tell me about yourself," Max Freehurst said. "All I know about you is what I and my associates read about you in the papers of two weeks from now."

"Well, I'm thirty-one, born here in Chicago, went to Northwestern and got my degree in business administration, went to work for Allied Industries, parlayed a thousand dollars into a quarter of a million on the stock exchange in five years, as a hobby, meanwhile marrying Alice for two years, then being rudely awakened to the fact that she couldn't be true to any man

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for long. I got that out of my hair three years ago, took a look at my life, and decided I had worked for someone else long enough.

"I quit Allied, took a partner in a garage venture that has paid off well, took two brothers as partners in a restaurant venture that has built up into a chain of ten restaurants, have built a nucleus of rental housing that is paying for itself. I live in the one in Winetka, with a couple who act as servants there, with the man looking after my other houses. Good couple.

"I have my office here in the Loop, where you got in touch with me. A receptionist and a bookkeeper. Nothing there. The receptionist is married and her husband works for a firm of architects in the same building. The bookkeeper is a family man. That about covers it. No girl friends with a claim on me, no one I've harmed financially or otherwise—that I know of."

Max Freehurst nodded slowly. "Considering any new business ventures?"

"Oh, of course. All the time. As a matter of fact, day before yesterday—" Earl Baker stopped, his eyes widening.

"Yes?" Dr. Freehurst said.

Earl Baker shook his head. "Uh uh," he said. "Couldn't possibly be anything there. An inventor with a novelty gadget, and I half-promised to put up the money for a factory to manufacture it. I'm going to do it, but I didn't commit myself yet. I've had in mind starting a factory to manufacture various things, and this crystallizes it."

"Who's the inventor?" Max Freehurst asked.

"A man named George Mason," Earl Baker said. "But there couldn't possibly be anything there. I'm going to give him a much better deal than he hopes for. What he wants is either ten thousand cash for the patents or a straight royalty deal."

"What are you going to give him?"

"Half interest in about thirty thousand dollars' worth of factory—a forty-nine percent interest—plus a royalty and a salaried job as general manager."

"Why so generous?" Max Freehurst said.

"That's my formula," Earl said. "I invest in men, not gadgets. George Mason has plenty on the ball. All it needs is someone like me to harness it and not let it go to waste."

"Now that you've remembered that," Max Freehurst said, "what else can you recall about day before yesterday?"

"That's all there was."

"Then we have to consider that the most likely place to start in uncovering our potential murderer," Max said.

"But he wouldn't—" Earl began.

"Not necessarily him," Max said. "Someone connected with him, possibly, or with his gadget. What is the gadget, by the way?"

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"Well," Earl said, "I promised to keep it secret. Damn it, if it hadn't rained, if that pigeon hadn't done what you said it would . . . This whole thing has me off balance."

"We have two weeks to work on it," Max Freehurst said. "I'd like to see the results of tomorrow morning's hypnotic session to see if our conference has materially affected the probabilities. So why don't we let things ride until this time tomorrow? You will have time to get used to the idea, I'll have more to go on."

"Good enough," Earl said. "By the way, what do you hope to get out of this? A fee? It seems to me you have a rather tenuous service, but if you can uncover enough to show me the possibility of an attempt to kill me, I'll grant your thesis and be glad to pay you a substantial fee. This whole thing interests me. I'd like to look into it more. These morning sessions you speak of, for example."

"Possibly later," Dr. Freehurst said, rising.

The two men shook hands. Earl Baker went out into the reception room. At the sliding glass panel he paused and smiled at Linda Parnell.

"What did your crystal ball say?" he asked.

"Well . . ." she said reluctantly, then colored slightly and handed him a slip of paper she had already typed. "You can pick me up at six-thirty," she said.

In the hall Earl Baker closed the door gently, glancing once more at the legend, *Dr. M. G. Freehurst & Associates.* He glanced at his wristwatch on the way to the elevator bank, saw that it was ten minutes to four.

In the downstairs lobby he started toward the phone booths, changed his mind, went out into the rain and took a taxi. Ten minutes later he stood before a similar door in another office building, bearing the legend, *E. E. Baker & Associates.*

Inside, he raised his eyebrows questioningly at the blond receptionist. The worried expression on her face diminished a little. She nodded and glanced significantly toward the door marked *Private.*

"We're not to be disturbed," he said, his hand on the knob about to enter his office.

He closed the door carefully from the inside, nodded at the man sitting beside the desk with an *Esquire* open on his lap.

"Hello, Mr. Mason," Earl said as he circled the desk and sat down. He glanced again at the alert expression on George Mason's face, and picked up the letter opener, stabbing with it at the desk blotter, an expression of bafflement growing on his face. "I don't know what to say now," he blurted.

"Why?" George Mason said. "Has something come up?"

Earl Baker looked across at the inventor. *What did a murderer look like?* Two days ago George Mason had looked like nothing more than an intelligent

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and sensible man. A man with a good idea. Now . . .

Those bright blue eyes that blinked from behind thick-lensed glasses—could they change to the staring eyes of a homicidal maniac at some fancied wrong? Those somewhat thin lips that curled down at one corner and up at the other—could they compress into a straight line with homicidal fury?

The novelty gadget sat on a corner of the desk. It was an electric fan that had no motor and no blades, no moving parts at all, except the air that would rush through its wire screens when it was turned on.

Earl wasn't sure how it worked, but he felt sure it could not be a motive for murder. Not in itself.

Suddenly Earl wished with every atom of his being that he had never seen George Mason. The feeling surprised him. Mason had a natural money maker, a gadget that could be mass produced for less than a dollar and wholesaled for at least three. It was a terrific deal.

It was almost too good to be true. That was it. That, added to Dr. Freehurst.

"No," Earl said. "That is, yes, something has come up. Not in connection with you and your gadget. It has to do with my general activities, and until I get it out of the way I'm afraid I can't devote much time to getting this settled."

"How long do you thing it will be?" George Mason asked.

"Not longer than two weeks," Earl said.

"Is that all?" Relief showed on George Mason's face. "Well, let's let it ride then. I'll come back in two weeks." He stood up and held out his hand.

"Fine," Earl said, standing up and shaking hands. "Fine."

It wasn't until Mason had gone out the door that it occurred to Earl that he should have made it longer than two weeks to eliminate Mason from the picture. And he didn't have Mason's address—unless Olga had it. He went to the door and asked her.

She didn't.

"It was," Earl said, "as though I were a puppet who had to do and say the very things I should not have."

Max Freehurst smiled sympathetically. "I know how you feel," he said. "And evidently what you did crystallized the murder pattern, because in this morning's session the newspapers of the twenty-ninth *all* headline your death. They're evenly divided on where your body will be found. One of them—just one of them—stated your body was found at a cabin in Wisconsin."

"I have a cabin there," Earl said.

"I surmised you must," Max said. "We call a lone occurrence at two weeks distance a long-shot symptom. The pattern developing is obviously one where you try every way you can to avoid contact with your murderer, and fail."

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"Then there's no hope?" Earl said, a muscle in his cheek twitching.

"I didn't say that," Max Freehurst said. "On the contrary, when the shape of the future is being affected it is an indication that we are making progress. Yesterday's events definitely changed events of the twenty-eighth, so we can examine them in more detail to smoke out what did it. At least a third of our cases follow a pattern similar to yours so far. When we enter the problem the pattern of murder crystallizes into definiteness, we get at its root, and long before the would-be fatal day we have removed all possibility of murder."

"A third of your cases?" Earl Baker said in surprise. "I thought—"

"You thought you were the only one?" Max Freehurst smiled. "No. We've been operating this office for two years now. If you care to check the police records you will find in 1965, and before, there were over two hundred murders a year in Chicago, but in 1966 there were only five, and so far this year there have been only two. The five murders in 1966 all occurred in October, during a period when seventeen murders were approaching certainty. It was just too much for us to handle, all at once."

"Then the police are in on this?" Earl asked.

"No. Neither are the newspapers." Max Freehurst looked smug. "You see, the same technique applies to keeping our operation secret. If the police or the press were to learn about us, we would read about it in the papers far enough before it happened to prevent it."

"But why do you want it kept quiet?" Earl said.

"When our organization first started," Dr Freehurst said, leaning his elbows on his desk, "we decided that our first duty was to save lives. There were so many things we could do. Make fortunes on the stock market, win all the money at the race tracks. In fact, we did a little of that to finance our work, at first, and also to study what would happen. That was how we discovered the law of diminishing returns.

"You see, the moment we enter a picture with our knowledge of probable futures we become an integral part of that picture, and alter it. If a certain horse is going to win, for example, and we bet on that horse, our bet changes the odds to compensate. And the oftener we win the more widely we become known as consistent winners, until finally our betting changes the odds so drastically that we can win no more than ten percent. The stock market was even worse. It's extremely sensitive to emerging factors, and in almost no time at all just letting it be known we were in the market for certain stocks took them off the market.

"We settled down to our real work very quickly. Saving lives.

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Preventing murders is only one phase of it. If everyone knew of our work, our organization, compensating factors would arise to completely nullify it."

"How?" Earl asked.

"There are so many ways it's pitiful," Max Freehurst said. "The police exist to preserve law and order, to prevent crime where possible, to catch the criminal. Criminals and potential criminals, knowing of the existence of the police, take into account their threat to success. It would be the same thing if our organization were known to the public. We would still be instrumental in preventing a few murders, but—" Dr. Freehurst spread his arms in a gesture of resignation. "Like Will Rogers, all we know is what we read in the newspapers. By the way, did you have a good time with our receptionist last night?"

Earl Baker grinned. "Read the newspapers and find out," he said.

Earl reached out and pressed the starting button on the *airmover*, as George Mason had named it. There was a faint a.c. hum at first, and then as the thing began to generate a strong draft, complete silence. He squinted into the breeze and tried to make out what was going on.

The airmover consisted of a flat plastic ring half an inch thick, four inches broad, and about ten inches in inside diameter, set firmly into a heavy base that contained small transformers and other electrical parts. The plastic ring was covered on both sides by quarter-inch mesh copper screen, and as nearly as he could make out there were at least three other screens inside.

Nothing else. Five discs of metal screen evenly separated, and somehow, when the current went on, air just seemed to move through them in one direction.

Mason had been frankly reticent about explaining how it worked, and had boasted that it was put together in such a way that if anyone tried to take it apart the circuits would be scrambled beyond deciphering.

Some unknown principle must be involved that Mason felt confident no one could discover by any examination that could be made of the gadget.

Was it an important enough thing for murder? Was the principle used in the airmover good only for competing with electric fans or was it something with far-reaching consequences, like most electrical and mechanical principles.

Was it even electrical, basically?

Earl shut the thing off and turned it on several times, idly. He was alone in his office.

It had been a week since Dr. Freehurst had first contacted him and told him of his "impending murder." For the past four days nothing had produced any change in what the newspapers of the twenty-ninth would carry about his murder, He would be shot.

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Coyly, the papers kept varying the location of his body, the time it would be found.

Two days ago Earl had watched the morning session. Fifty people, two-thirds of them women, had entered the long room beyond Dr. Freehurt's office and sat down in their places at a row of small desks on which were typewriters, notepaper—and the morning newspapers.

A bell had rung at seven o'clock, and the fifty people had picked up the newspapers and started reading them. At seven-thirty the bell had rung again and they had lain the newspapers aside.

"This reading routine is necessary for simplification," Dr. Freehurst had explained to Earl. "You see, it enables us to send their minds to definite times in the future under mass hypnosis. Times when they will be reading the day's papers."

When the fifty people put aside their newspapers Earl saw them each pick up a capsule from a napkin and wash it down with water from a paper cup. Then, leisurely, they had each put paper in their typewriter and sat back, closing their eyes.

"They will be put under by a recording over a loudspeaker," Dr. Freehurst had said. "It will have no effect on you or me because we aren't conditioned to it and haven't taken a capsule. The capsules contain a mixture of tranquilizers and other drugs conducive to hypnosis."

The voice over the loudspeaker, when it came, was pleasant and conversational. It spoke for two or three minutes on hypnosis and time, and without breaking its tempo it inserted, "When I reach ten you will be free of the present. One, two, three, . . ." And after it reached ten it said, "You will go to seven o'clock. You are reading a newspaper. The date on it is May twentieth, nineteen sixty-seven. You will type out first the death notices as you read them."

Fifty pairs of hands had started moving over fifty keyboards. And to Earl Baker it had seemed somehow unreal, too lacking in anything spectacular. No prickly force fields, no unearthly sounds. It could have been fifty adult students in a typing school . . .

"They are *conditioned*," Dr. Freehurst had said.

Earl had looked at the fifty faces. Ordinary faces.

"Carefully selected volunteers," Dr. Freehurst had said, sensing his thought. "They get no salary."

Earl Baker had recognized one of them. A clerk in a cigar store he sometimes frequented.

And now Earl sat in his office, playing with the airmover, trying to figure out how it worked.

How did air move? How did minds go into the future?

An excitement possessed him as he connected the two questions in his mind.

If—somehow—you could send the air in the space between two screens into the future, so that

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it wasn't there now, there would be a vacuum, and air would rush in—but from all sides. It would take a fraction of a second for it to start rushing in, and then if you sent the air coming from one direction into the future and brought back to the present air that wasn't moving—

He pressed his fingers to his temples in an agony of concentration.

It took more than one stage. You had to pull the air rushing in the other direction back into another vacuum, so it all rushed in the same direction.

Suddenly he knew he had it. Time travel. A simple application of its principles, but—time travel.

He looked up. George Mason stood in the open doorway.

Dr. Freehurst skimmed over the fifty sheets of typewritten paper on his desk. Smiling suddenly, he flicked the intercom switch. "Linda," he said. "Get Mr. Baker on the phone and tell him everything will be all right. All mention of his murder has vanished from the papers of the twenty-ninth. Find out from him, if you can, what happened during the past twenty-four hours that changed the picture."

He continued scanning the typewritten sheets while he waited. Suddenly he scowled. He flipped over several sheets, his scowl deepening.

He reached for the intercom switch while he continued to read. The intercom came to life before he touched it.

"Dr. Freehurst," Linda's voice sounded, worriedly.

"Yes?" he said.

"Mr. Baker's secretary informs me she has been unable to locate him. He is known to have been in his office last night after office hours, but there is no record of him leaving the building. She has called in the police. Mr.—" Her voice broke. "Earl has disappeared!" she wailed.

"Yes," Dr. Freehurst said sadly. "I know. And so, according to the newspapers, has a Mr. George Mason. His disappearance won't be noticed until day after tomorrow. And—My my! We *must* get better organized in our work! In Mr. Mason's hotel room will be discovered an—according to later newspapers—'obviously counterfeit ten dollar bill' with a 1974 date of issue printed on it!"

THE END

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THE SECRET OF THE SHAN

By RICHARD GREER

The Shan of Yetun-Vey—on this planet a thousand light-years from Earth—was a crook, a nogoodnick, a bounder, a general all-around bum. In fact he stole every virtue the Terrans figured they alone had the right to practice.

DOUG OVERMAN lay flat on his belly on the roof of the low building, inhaling the odd aromas of the ancient city of Yetun-Vey. In the street below, he could hear the clatter of heavy hooves as the Shan's Guard trotted through the streets on their unicorn-like mounts.

Overman was both worried and angry—and a little frightened.

Damn it, he thought, *I didn't ask to get involved in the petty tribal wars of a planet a thousand light-years from Sol!*

An officer of the Guard gobbled something in Yetuni. The clatter of the mount's hooves stopped. What was going on? Had he been spotted?

Overman cursed his lack of knowledge of Yetuni. If he could only understand what they were saying. If they knew he was on the roof—

He had to find out; he had to take the chance. He would never have dared to peek over the edge of the roof in broad daylight, but the eternally moonless night of the planet was only dimly illuminated by the flickering torches in the streets below. He crawled over and peered down between two of the carved gargoyles that decorated the roof's edge.

In the red-orange of the torchlight below, he could see the troop of guardsmen, still mounted. Their officer was talking to an unmounted man—a peddler of some sort. The peddler was gabbling and gesturing, shrugging his shoulders, spreading his hands.

In spite of the fact that

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"When I'm through you'll look like a native."

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Overman didn't understand the language, it was obvious that the peddler was disclaiming any knowledge of the Earthman's whereabouts.

The officer gobbled again, and the troop rode off down the narrow, cobblestoned streets.

Overman lay back flat on the roof and tried to think. What the devil was he going to do next? The whole mess was a mistake—a deadly mistake, however.

He had come to Sargon III as an anthropologist; the Earth base had sent letters of introduction to several of the Shans in this territory, and the native princes had seemed to be pleased to attract the interest of one of the all-powerful Earthmen.

Sargon III was a backward planet; the civilization had not evolved much above that of the city-states of ancient Greece. The natives were humanoid to a high degree; without close examination, it was impossible to tell one of the Yetuni, for example, from a Terran Polynesian.

Doug Overman had gotten along well with the people of Sargon until he had come to the city-state of Yetun-Vey.

The Shan of Yetun-Vey was a big, powerfully-muscled man who had greeted Overman cordially, but with a faint touch of suspicion in his dark brown eyes. Instead of being allowed to conduct his anthropological studies in freedom, as he had in the neighboring state of Gowa-Vey, Overman had constantly found a guard at his elbow.

"For your protection," the Shan had said, in his slightly accented English. Overman had not asked against what.

And then, only a few hours ago, he had been strolling through the court gardens, after carefully eluding his guard so that he could be alone. A light at a window had interested him, and he had strolled over, vaguely curious. And he had seen the revolvers. Cases of them, with cartridges, in a candle-lit room.

Instantly, he had known why the Shan of Yetun-Vey had been suspicious of him. Those guns could only have been stolen from the Earth base—or else some Earth criminal had sold them to him. Evidently, the Shan intended to use them against his neighboring enemy, the Shan of Ahnkiza-Vey.

Overman had walked quietly away. It was none of his business if one Shan wanted to fight another, and he wasn't

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responsible for the Earth regulations that prohibited the selling of even such antiquated weapons as firearms to natives of backward planets.

And then had come the gobbling cry behind him. Overman knew enough of the alien language to recognize the order to "Kill the Earthling spy!"

They were after him now, and Overman knew why. The Shan thought he was a spy from the Earth base, or possibly, a spy for the Shan of Ahnkiza-Vey. No amount of pleading or protecting would do any good; the Shan would kill him and then look innocent when the Earth base finally got around to investigating. And that would be months from now. Besides, Doug Overman had gone into the native sections of the planet at his own risk; the government of Earth couldn't afford to protect every man who went into the interior because it would take too much time and effort. He was completely on his own.

Overman had fled from the palace of the Shan, barely escaping the hissing arrows from the crossbows of the guards. The city was his only hope for a while, but somehow he had to find a way to get out of Yetun-Vey.

He lay there on the roof, trying to figure a way out. He could move around at night, skulking in the shadows to keep away from the Shan's Guard, but when dawn came, he would have to be well hidden. With his blond hair and light skin, he would be spotted as an Earthman at five hundred yards. He would have to find a hiding place now.

But where was he to go? What was he to do? If only he'd brought a flyer—but that, too, was illegal. He had ridden by coach or on the backs of the unicorn-like *thegs*, that the natives used as riding animals. And now, he had no money; it had all been left behind at the Shan's palace. If only he hadn't been such a damned fool! Why hadn't he stayed in his room? Or why hadn't he left as soon as he had seen that the Shan wasn't exactly the friendly sort?

Simply because it had never occurred to him that anyone would think his presence was dangerous.

It was still early in the evening; around him, he could hear the faint chatter of the natives as they went about their business, the bounce of hand carts as they were pull-

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ed clatteringly across the stone streets.

And then he heard another sound—the faint rasp of steel on stone! He jerked his head around just as a Guardsman lifted himself over the edge of the roof from a nearby building. A trap! The troop of Guards had only pretended to go away!

The Guardsman was peering around the roof. He was clearly silhouetted against the sky, but the roof was dark, and Overman realized that the soldier couldn't see him. But the man was only five feet away; he'd see his quarry any second now. Overman knew he had only one chance.

When the Guardsman looked away, to peer behind a nearby chimney-pot, Overman leaped to his feet and rushed the man. The soldier heard the noise and turned before Overman reached him. His hand went to the hilt of his sword, but by that time the Earthman was on him.

The Guardsman's loud yell was terminated suddenly as Overman's fist landed in the pit of his stomach. The Earthman followed up immediately with a crashing blow to the man's chin. The Guardsman collapsed.

But now there were other cries, and footsteps clattered across the roof of the nearby building.

Swiftly, Overman snatched the sword from the belt of the fallen soldier and jerked off his heavy cloak. Then he ran, vaulting over the edge of the building to another roof five feet below. Behind him, a torch blazed suddenly into life, and then another and another. Cries filled the air, a gobbling of Yetuni echoed in the night.

The roofs of the houses of Yetun-Vey were close together and flat, and the streets were narrow and crooked. Overman found it easy to leap across one of the narrow alleyways, no more than four feet wide. A crossbow bolt sang by his head and clattered against a distant wall.

Then, ahead of him, another soldier leaped out from behind a chimney. Overman almost ran into him before he could stop himself. The soldier's drawn sword slashed down in a murderous cut.

Overman had never handled a sword in his life, but the parry was almost instinctive. The weapon in his own hand came up. Steel rang against steel, deflecting the blow. The soldier swung his weapon back for another cut,

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and left himself wide open for a simple thrust with the point. Overman's sword ran him through.

For a fraction of a second, the Earthman was startled at how easy it had been. The Yetuni had never discovered the use of a sword point; like the ancient Greeks and Romans, their training was entirely in the use of the edge.

Overman leaped over the body and kept going.

Then, quite suddenly, he came to a street. It was narrow, only about ten feet wide. But it was too far to jump across to the next roof. Behind him, the heavy sandals of the Guardsmen thumped on the roof.

He *had* to jump.

He slid the sword into his belt and leaped.

He missed the opposite roof by a good foot, and slammed into the wall, almost knocking his breath out. As he fell, his clutching fingers grasped the top of a window. Almost automatically, he swung himself in and landed in a heap inside the darkened room. For a moment, he was too dazed to move.

Then a frightened voice said something in Yethani. It was a woman—inside the room!

Instantly, Overman was on his feet, his sword in his hand. In the dimness of the room, he could see the girl cowering against the wall near a pile of sleeping furs. Through the window, he could hear the shouts of the soldiers.

He pointed the sword at the girl's throat and held his finger to his lips. "I know you can't understand English," he whispered harshly, "but you can understand this." He knew that he could never bring himself to kill her, but he hoped she didn't know that.

She gasped. Then she said: "You speak the English of the Earthmen! And they want to kill you?"

Overman was too startled to say anything.

She stood up from her bed, then, and said: "Trust me, please. I can send them away."

She went to the window. In her own language, she called to the soldier on the roof. "What is the cause of the clatter?"

"We chase an enemy of the Shan!" the soldier called. "We saw him come this way, but we have lost him."

"Ah! Then that was what I heard but a moment ago!" She pointed downward, to the street twenty feet below. "I heard someone fall. Then I heard a noise as of someone

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limping. I think perhaps he hurt himself."

"Thanks unto you, gracious one."

"And to you, keeper of the peace."

The soldiers moved away, and, as their voices receded, Overman whispered: "What did you say to them?"

She told him, then asked: "Who are you?"

"Never mind. The less you know, the better off you'll be. I'll get out of here."

She nodded. "Very well. It is best. But wait! Your skin! It is too light! And your hair and clothes. That will never do!"

She drew the shutters of the window and struck a steel and flint tinder box. Then she lit the smoky oil lamp.

And then for a moment, they simply looked at each other.

She was tall and slender, with dark, softly waving hair. Her tanned skin glowed in the flickering light. Around her hips, she wore the folded indoor skirt of the Yetuni women. And, like all young women of her race, her full, round breasts were bare.

Evidently, she liked the firm chin and intelligent blue eyes of the blond Earthman, for she smiled before she turned to a low table near the wall.

"I have a—how do you say it? Color? Stain? For the hair, you know."

"Hair dye," Overman said.

"Yes, so." She picked up a small bottle made of glazed and decorated porcelain. "This will do." Then she pointed to a small, almost invisible scar near her hairline. "From here, the hair comes out white. It is not—not—How do you say? It is not considered pretty."

"I see." Overman nodded.

The girl set to work. First she used the dye on his hair undiluted, changing it from yellow to almost black. Then she diluted it with water and rubbed it into his skin. She gave him one of the simple, wrap-around skirts that the Yetuni of both sexes wore, and he draped the cloak around his shoulder.

She looked him over. "I think now you will go as a Yetuni—except for your eyes. But there is nothing we can do. Let no one see your eyes." Then she pointed at the door. "And now, go. I have done all I can. I don't want to get into trouble—or to get my master and mistress into trouble."

Overman understood then why the girl had helped him; she was a slave, probably

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taken from some neighboring nation. She would have no particular love for the Shan of Yetun-Vey. Had she been an Earth girl, Overman would have kissed her then, but the people of Sargon III regarded kissing as one of the most intimate and sacred acts between lovers. Even the attempt would be taken as a disgusting insult from a lascivious lecher. Overman could do no more than thank her verbally.

Minutes later, he was again on the streets of Yetun-Vey.

He walked slowly down the narrow passageways between the buildings, avoiding anyone who walked towards him, and keeping his head down, as though in deep thought. In the flickering torchlight, it was doubtful that anyone would see his blue eyes, but he didn't want to take any chances.

He was tired—so terribly tired. It was almost midnight, and he had spent most of the night running. His body felt as though it had been put through a wine press.

But where could he sleep? He couldn't get into an inn. Even if they didn't notice his eyes, how could he get by without speaking the language?

Besides, the streets were full of soldiers; mounted members of the Guard were at every corner. Overman would have to get out of the city; he would be safe nowhere else...

He headed for the nearest gate in the great wall that surrounded the city-state of Yetun-Vey.

Four hours later, Doug Overman realized he was trapped. Every gate was guarded; everyone who came in or went out was inspected carefully. There were three times the number of soldiers as usual, and the walls were both thick and high.

Yetun-Vey was one of the wealthiest of the city-states of Sargon III, and it had gained and kept its wealth because it was well fortified. And it was as hard to get out of as it was to get in.

Overman's head throbbed. He *had* to get away. And he had to get some sleep. Normally, he could easily have stayed awake much longer, but so much physical exercise and the slam on the head he had taken were beginning to tell on him.

It would be dawn soon. If he didn't get out before the sun rose . . .

He heard a humming sound in the sky and looked up.

He couldn't see a thing in the darkness of the sky, but he

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knew what that humming was. A flyer! Someone was dropping an antigrav powered flyer to the Shan's palace in the center of the city!

It all fit. Some Earthman was smuggling arms into Yetun-Vey against the rules of the High Space Commission. And using a flyer was equally illegal, so it must be the same man. Unless, of course, it was the Commission Police coming to retake the armament.

In either case, Overman realized, he would have to get to the palace. If it were the Police, they could take him out of Yetun-Vey. If it were the gunrunner, it might be possible to steal his flyer or at least use the radiophone that was sure to be aboard it.

Determinedly, he set out for the palace, nearly a mile away.

Doug Overman walked very slowly through the grounds of the Palace of the Shan. Eluding the guards and getting in had been relatively simple; the palace was the last place they would expect him to come. Once inside, he had not tried to hide or skulk in the darkness, though he avoided the direct light of the torches that flickered from the wall sconces. His disguise, plus the soldier's cloak that he wore should be enough to protect him if he didn't act suspiciously.

The question was, how to get to the roof? The palace was not tall; the architecture of Sargon III did not run to great heights. But even the three levels of the palace was enough to put a barrier between himself and the flyer. Climbing up the outer wall was out of the question. The rough-hewn stone offered plenty of handholds, but the torches illuminated it too brightly. And a man seen climbing up the wall of the palace would be out of place no matter what he looked like. That was no good.

He decided that the best way was the bold approach. They hadn't suspected that he would come inside the palace grounds; how much less would they think he would walk boldly into the palace itself?

It worked. He picked one of the huge doors and simply walked in, right past the guard who was standing at rigid attention. The guard didn't even look at him.

He reached the second floor by the simple expedient of walking up the stairway. Was it going to be as easy as all that?

As he walked by one of the rooms, he heard voices—in

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English! He stopped, listening.

"We will get the girl to talk." It was the queerly accented voice of the Shan. "She was the last one to see the other Earthling alive; we have a witness who saw him go into her window, although no one has seen him since."

"She'd better talk," said another voice; "if that guy gets away, the whole thing is washed up."

The second voice was obviously that of the gunrunner. But it was the import of their words that struck Overman. The girl who had befriended him had been captured!

The Shan's voice gabbled in the Yetuni language, and then the girl's voice—frightened and shaking.

"She claims she knows nothing at all," said the Shan in English. "She has never seen the Earthman." There was a pause, then he continued: "However, a little torture should loosen up her tongue."

"Go ahead," said the gunrunner. "We've got to find that guy."

Overman stood there, indecisive for a moment. If he went ahead to the roof, he might be able to get away unseen in the flyer. But that would mean leaving the girl to be tortured. He hesitated only for an instant. Then he drew the sword at his side and eased open the door.

Both the gunrunner and the Shan had their backs to him, but when the door opened, they turned. The Earthman had a beam pistol at his hip, but he didn't attempt to draw it. Overman looked just like another of the Yetuni guards to him.

The Shan knew better. He saw Overman's blue eyes and recognized him immediately under the brown skin stain.

He shouted something and reached for his sword hilt.

Overman was already in action. Before the gunrunner could realize what was happening, the flat of Overman's sword crashed against his temple. The gunrunner dropped to the floor, unconscious.

Then Overman turned his attention to the Shan. The Yetuni ruler was fast and still fairly young. In addition, he was an expert swordsman. Overman knew he stood no chance against an expert who knew how to use the point. But the Yetuni swordplay used the edge, not the point. They used the weapon in wide swings, to cut and hack, not to stab. They had not yet learned that the point is by far the

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most useful and deadliest part of the weapon.

Coming in close, Overman parried an edge cut and lunged forward. The Shan danced back out of the way, somewhat puzzled by the Earthman's swordplay.

Overman stepped in again as the ruler brought up his weapon for a backhand cut.

Overman didn't want to kill the Shan; he knew that if he did, his chances of getting out alive were practically nil. He aimed his thrusts, therefore, at the Yetuni's sword-arm, not at his heart.

When the Shan lifted his weapon for a third cut, Overman leaped in, thrusting for the shoulder. The point of his sword went into the flesh, and the Shan's sword spun across the room, released from nerveless fingers on the downswing.

"Don't move an inch!" Overman snapped, holding the point of his weapon at the ruler's heart. The Shan froze. "Get the Earthman's gun," Overman told the girl.

Quickly, she ran over to the fallen gunrunner and pulled the beam pistol from its holster. She handed it to Overman, who lowered his sword point from the Shan's heart at the same time he aimed the beam gun. "Wake up the Earthman," he commanded the Shan. The Yetuni ruler, staring at the deadly beam gun, obeyed. He slapped the gunrunner a few times, and the Earthman finally groaned and shook his head. Within a few minutes, he was fully awake.

"All right," said Overman, "we're going up to the roof. The first one to act up gets a beam."

They went out of the room and climbed the stairway in silence. When they reached the roof, Overman noticed that there were four guards around the flyer.

"Order them to leave," he told the Shan. "No tricks now; the girl can tell what you're saying."

The order was given, and the guards obediently turned and headed for the other stairway across the roof.

Overman marched the two men toward the flyer; at the same time, twisted the intensity control knob on the beam pistol down to minimum. When they were standing by the flyer, Overman fired twice, knocking them unconscious without killing them.

"Help me get them into the baggage compartment," he told the girl. "Quickly!"

When they were safely stowed away, he and the slave

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girl climbed inside. Overman activated the antigravs, and the little ship lifted into the air.

Then he picked up the radiophone and called the High Space Commission. After listening, the officer said: "We've been on that guy's trail for months. Good work. We'll have to release the Shan to his people, of course; he's not subject to Earth law. But we'll have a ship there in an hour to get the guns.

"Meanwhile, how would you like to do us another favor? We've had an operative there in Yetun-Vey for several weeks, trying to get a line on what the Shan was doing. She's been disguised as a native, and—"

"She?" Overman jerked his head around to look at the girl. She smiled.

"That's right; you're a good guesser, Overman. I was afraid you'd be suspicious when I showed you the dye. I didn't know who you were, so I couldn't reveal myself."

"What's going on there?" said the officer's voice from the headquarters of the High Space Commission.

"I was just about to tell you that I have already picked up your operative."

"Already? Say, you're a good man; we could use you!"

"Me? No thanks! I'll just go on being an anthropologist; I get in enough trouble that way. Besides, it was just luck." He looked again at the girl. "Damned good luck!"

When he hung up, he frowned for a moment. "By the way, what did you say your name was?"

The girl began laughing so hard she could hardly get the words out. And then she was kissing him so hard that it didn't matter. **THE END**

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Earth was doomed. Not from atomic explosion nor from crushing outerspace invasion. Not to the accompaniment of thunder and flaming glory. Still, it would be a dead, empty world after the——

MARCH OF THE YELLOW DEATH

By ELLIS HART

FIRST came the total blankout of all communications.

Then the rising whine of great motors in the air.

Then they dropped the spondle. What the word meant, no one knew. Nor where it came from. Some said the word came out of Kansas City, just before the yellow spondle overwhelmed the inhabitants. They said one lone radio message came through, and the half-crazed radioman screamed, "The spondle! It's all over everything. It's—"

And that was all. So the nation—or what was left of the nation—called it the spondle. Whatever it really was, they couldn't tell, but it appeared to be a greasy, thick and viscose substance that grew and pulsed and formed, getting larger as it moved.

It rolled across the countryside like some animated gelatine, smoothing over everything, getting larger and larger. Whole towns disappeared beneath its progressing bulk. At its smooth edges it turned under as it rolled, like quicksand mud sliding over itself. It got a deeper and deeper yellow as it grew, as if it were swallowing the houses and trees and grass and people, and converting them to its own substance.

What little information there was circulating, swore it was an invasion from space. The ship had been seen just before the spondle dropped. It had been huge, and shaped like the claw of a lobster, and it had whined into the atmos-

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What manner of death could be more horrible?

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phere a few minutes after the total blankout of radio, wireless, TV and radar. It had swooped low over Kansas, and dropped the one gigantic teardrop of spondle.

Then it had zoomed up, and disappeared. Whatever it had meant to do, it had done. It had dropped the spreading yellow gelatine-death, and left the Earth. Completely devastated of life.

In a matter of days it had covered the entire southwest, spreading in a deep yellow wave over everything, inundating Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, the upper portion of Mexico, and spreading down past Baja, California. Water didn't stop it.

After it moved across Colorado, Utah, Nevada and California, it moved out into the Pacific, sinking down into the water, and building itself up. Till it was a blanket that covered everything. It worked its ways toward the Midwest, just as inexorably. It worked up toward Canada, and the trees sank beneath the yellow stuff. Nothing seemed to stop it . . . not fire, not water, not chemicals, not physical violence.

It made no aggressive move; it was not in itself sentient, but it moved steadily, and it was obvious what the final outcome would be.

For after three weeks, the entire United States was gone. Europe was beneath the yellow tide. Japan could see the yellow horror coming toward them across the North Pacific. Thousands died before it arrived, for though it did not cause a tidal wave, it *did* swallow all the sea life.

Only the northeasternmost tip of Greenland was above spondle. South America was gone, and the spondle had long since crossed the Tropic of Capricorn, heading for the Sandwich Islands. A streamer of spondle had attacked Rio de Oro and French West Africa. The eventual outcome was horrifyingly clear, to the few frantic men who reconnoitered by jet plane, high above the mass of pulsing yellow stuff.

The Earth *had* been invaded, *had* been overcome, and within two months, the unbroken surface of glistening yellow gelatine would be the new surface of the planet.

There was no hope. Earth was dead. Whoever or whatever had dropped the spondle, had won the battle without loss to themselves, in the most terrifying and overwhelming manner possible. The outcome was clear, and the end was in sight.

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The battle was over. Earth was dead.

The name of that particular Florida key was Sandor Key.

It was named after August Sandor, who had bought it for his seclusion. August had been swallowed by the spondle while fishing off his rowboat, and the key was left untouched. The only reason the Key wasn't under spondle was Bailey Stone.

The only reason Bailey Stone hadn't been swallowed was the "field" he had erected two months before the arrival of the spaceship and the dropping of the spondle teardrop.

August Sandor and Bailey Stone had had some unusual concepts about what the energy-stream was, and how it might be tamed for personal use. They had pooled their cash assets, during their stay at Miami University, and bought the Key. They had used the last of Bailey's father's will to get them the field generator equipment they thought they needed, and they had moved to the Key for seclusion.

After eight months, they knew they had done nothing. The energy stream mathematics were all there, all set down sweet and simple. There was no reason why they couldn't build the generator. So they tried. And failed. Somewhere in the mechanism, nothing happened. Passing between one coil and another, the power frittered off to somewhere, and they got nothing. They knew they had created nothing.

Except the "field" which kept Bailey Stone alive.

One experiment had produced an effect neither of them had known about. The power had warped itself across that gulf between coils, leaped a transistor, cleverly evaded a "fail-safe" that might have put it back on the proper track, and spouted out into the atmosphere.

It had, in effect, created a force barrier around the Key, and around half a mile of Atlantic Ocean. It had stopped the spondle cold, and sent it scurrying around. Had August Sandor not been out fishing beyond the half-mile limit that day, he, too, would have survived the spondle horror. But he wasn't, and the gelatinous mass came spreading across the water, engulfing Sandor, boat, and fish to the bottom of the ocean, all at one time.

Now, only Sandor Key and Bailey Stone were left above-spondle. Bailey's experiment had saved his life, and he

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didn't know it. He probably never would, though he suspected as much. He had reasoned through the remarkable philosophy of the famous Sherlock Holmes:

If nothing but the impossible is left, then the impossible must be the solution to the problem.

After calculating what forces *might* have left Sandor Key untouched—for by this time he was certain the rest of the world was gone—and casting them out one by one, he arrived at the conclusion that the one thing Sandor Key had that the rest of the world did *not* have was the energy stream generators. And that somehow, they had produced this effect that had kept him safe.

Which did nothing to abet him. He was there, and he was alone. It was a slightly ridiculous way to think of it, but he *was*—in all probability—the last man on Earth. But not for long.

—

The fish that were left alive and swimming in the half mile of clear water would feed him for a while, but what happened when the ecology of Earth (was there an ecology any longer?) shifted to compensate for the total loss of all the oxygen-producing plants? What happened when the fish could not trap the other life they needed to eat, and died off?

What made him think he could live on Sandor Key the rest of his life . . . and why should he want to, anyhow?

Seclusion he had sought. Seclusion, yes, but total and complete isolation? On a dead world.

The radio had been dead since shortly after the teardrop of spondle had landed. The radar cast back no indication that movement or life existed anywhere within its perceptive radius. He was alone, no question of it.

Then the day came when he realized he would get nowhere on the generators. He had contented himself for a few days with the thought that now he could experiment in complete privacy. But somehow it was not the same. The thought that out there somewhere people *did* exist, should he need help or assistance with a problem, was one thing. But the sure knowledge that no one existed anywhere but here, was another.

And another that was terribly frightening.

On the day that fact hit him fully, he took the rifle from its excelsior nest in the unpacked carton of miscellany they had

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brought to the Key, and went out on the edge of the beach to blast his head off.

He took off his shirt (then wondered why) and sat down barefoot on the white sand. He fitted his toe against the trigger of the rifle, having made certain it was loaded, and put the barrel in his mouth. His eyes began to close, his toe to tighten on the trigger, when he saw the movement far out in the spondle.

It was a flicker, as though a bird were skimming the water's top and for an instant he was about to complete the movement of closing his eyes. But the flickering continued, and he watched it with growing fascination.

Finally, he stood up, and watched the movement come closer.

When it was almost to the edge of the spondle, about to breast clear water, he realized it for what it was.

A man.

Just like that. Without any great inflection or significance to the word. Just a man. Then he got the second wave of realization, and the rifle clattered to the sand unnoticed.

It *was* a man!

He had known futility about his experiments, just a moment before. Had known he was up against the wall, and without the steady trickle of information from other men of science, he was doomed to failure, for he was no lone-wolf genius. He had been convinced a moment before there was no reason to remain alive alone on this horror planet.

A moment before all hope had been expended . . . now with the appearance of life, the problem assumed new proportions. Now there was something to work for, someone to talk with, there was a meaning, swimming toward him.

By the time the man was within eye-range, Bailey knew something was wrong. The man was not swimming. At least he wasn't swimming with any style Bailey had ever seen. His hands were straight at his sides, and his head was raised slightly from the water, arching his back, and moving his legs in a sharp, up-and-down pinioning movement, that propelled him at a fantastic rate of speed.

Bailey kept his eyes on the man, and almost without knowing he was doing it, reached around at his feet for the rifle. The warmth of the metal made him more conscious of his position.

The spondle had swallowed

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everyone, even August. The world was dead, except himself, and he was now fairly sure he knew how *that* had happened . . . but what about this fellow? How had he escaped? What was he doing swimming in from a world-spanning sea of yellow spondle? Where was his boat? Who was he? And how did he happen to choose Sandor Key for his destination?

There wasn't another spit of land within a hundred miles. He *couldn't have* swum any distance like that. And the final—most frightening—factor was this: how could he swim in the spondle without it swallowing *him*, too?

A slight, icicle-cold shiver ran through Bailey Stone's body, and all the time, the man kept swimming, kept coming.

By the dull shadow-ring of rocks that circled the Key, just below the surface of the water, the man paused. Bailey Stone got his first full, unhampered view of the fellow.

It *wasn't* a man.

Not, at any rate, a man in the Bailey Stone accepted sense of the word. Not a man with two eyes, nose, mouth, hands, feet and torso. This was some weird, amphibian-looking creature, a bright golden yellow, with the anatomy of a human—twisted and changed, and so subtly altered, that Bailey Stone felt his face go cold, felt his hands stick numbly to the rifle.

This was *man-plus* or *man-minus*, but surely not man-normal. The fellow stepped to the top of a rock. His legs were half underwater, but what remained above was quite clear, almost more clear than he would have wished, to Bailey.

The fellow stood easily six and a half feet. His head was drawn to a point at the top, like some whipped cream bubble drawn up to a tip. His eyes were set low on the face, without lids. The nose was non-existent, unless the two breather holes set slanting between the eyes were a nose. The mouth was a wide, gill-ringed slash—precisely like a fish's mouth. The arms were thin and looked emaciated, ending in five silken tentacles, webbed between. The body was huge-chested and deep-lunged. He was naked, and Bailey could see his body was massively-muscled, terrifically-corded. He had no sex organs that Bailey could see, but his legs were so heavy, so thick—undoubtedly from all that swimming—they rubbed together at the thighs, and the

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organs might have been concealed by the mass of flesh.

Bailey was almost certain the feet would be webbed, also.

The man was bright golden yellow, but there were bands of lighter yellow . . . butter, almost-copper, faintest tinges of buttercup, buff and shades of saffron . . . all over his body. As though he had been taken from the coloring pan or furnace before the color had set properly on his body.

There was something—aside from the terror at his form—that made Bailey fear him. He didn't seem particularly aggressive, or look as though he was dangerous, but the thing had swum spondle from somewhere, and he was not of this world. That was so obvious, Bailey's arms raised the rifle almost while he filtered the thought through.

The thing was alien, not of the world he had known, not of any normal, natural progression of evolution.

Whatever it was, it *wasn't* Bailey Stone's kind of people.

The rifle leveled, he fired.

The bullet spattered short, kicking up a spray of water far in front of the gill-thing's feet. Bailey fired again. Between the instant when the shot sounded, and the bullet struck through empty air where the gill-thing had been, the "man" had dived headfirst off the rock, and was gone.

Disappearing into the water with a streak of deep yellow that flashed twice, then was gone. He rose once, a mile off, in the spondle, then surface-dived, and was gone completely.

There was no thought of suicide now. Somehow, it was a life again; a life with some purpose. Even if only the purpose of danger nearby. It was *something*, and to know he was not alone on the planet, was a new factor. Then, too, the very mystery of the gill-thing, the non-effects the spondle had on it, its appearance near Sandor Key, the whole situation, had a stimulating effect on Bailey.

Now he worked night and day on the generators, knowing nothing could come of it, because he just didn't have the raw data to perfect the energy-stream mechanism, but still working for the sake of working. And at night he would sit by the shore, cradling the .22 in his lap, watching the faintly phosphorescent spondle, waiting for the gill-thing to come back.

Watching, and hoping. And not hoping, for his terror at

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the thing grew, not diminished, as the days passed.

He had frightened the thing off with the shooting, but what if it came back? What did it want? Why had it come to him—for he was now certain the thing *had* been trying to make some sort of contact—and why did it not return?

Then, one evening, as he lay slumped against a palmetto tree, the work of the day having caught up with him, the thing *did* return.

His eyes had closed almost against his will. He had been watching the shimmering, unbroken line of spondle that ringed his Key. Watching the yellow glow that rose into the night, merging out finally to be deadened by the glow of the moon.

The gill-thing came up out of the water, a half mile down the beach, around the curve of the island.

Bailey let himself be feathered off into a half-sleep, his head slipping to the side and back, resting against the trunk of the palmetto. The rifle slid down his cradling arms, teetering on his thighs. It came to rest there, balanced, but unheld.

The gill-thing, silent and stealthy, skirted the shore, rounding the bed, till he located Bailey. He had surfaced out there for an instant, seen the man, and gone under again, to swim the rest of the way to shore underwater.

Now, dripping spondle-mixed water, he crept up behind the dozing man.

Perhaps it was the droplets of water striking sand; perhaps it was the shadow the gill-thing cast; or perhaps it was merely a premonition. But whatever it was, Bailey Stone's head snapped up, and he stared directly into that wide, fish-like face.

The thing made a grab with its thin, fragile arms. Bailey had a moment to wonder why there was so much strength in an arm that appeared so weak. Then he was lifted clear of the ground and hoisted above the thing's scaled head. He grabbed frantically for the rifle, which had fallen off his knees, but it was out of reach.

Then the thing had him above its head, struggling futilely. It began to walk toward the water's edge. Bailey kicked out madly, wildly, but the thing was too strong for him.

It stank of sour alcohol, or something akin, and the smell rang in Bailey's head. He had to do something! The thing either wanted to drown him, or carry him into the spondle, either one of which was death.

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He tensed his body, then flung all his weight backwards. The thing staggered, and Bailey shifted his weight, tossing his legs out to throw the thing further off-balance.

The gill-thing suddenly slipped, with all the maneuvering it was being forced to make, and Bailey rolled free from its grasp. He landed heavily on the sand, rolled, and came up sprinting. He made a dash for the rifle, got it in his hands, but the thing was too close to take aim.

Bailey swung the rifle, butt-first, and caught the thing in the face. The rifle butt went splat! and yellow stuff dripped away to the ground. The thing staggered and fell back, its face smashed above the eyes. It put a feeling hand to its forehead, and the hand came away with pulpy yellow drippings on the webs. He stared at Bailey for an instant, as though trying to comprehend what had happened, and Bailey swung the rifle again. The butt of the rifle hit the beast in the mouth, tearing away half the slashed opening as it snapped on, and away.

The thing fell down, writhing, its face a shredded thing.

It lay there at Bailey's feet, the yellow dripping of its face staining the ochre sands. Bailey Stone leaned up against a tree. He felt ill, and his mind was whirling. He had to exert conscious effort to keep from vomiting, swallowing thickly, again and again, to keep himself in command of his body.

The gill-thing finally lay stretched out to unconsciousness, and Bailey stood over him, watching the weird body in the pale light of the moon, half in shadow, half not. He watched it, and suddenly felt a great weariness, a great melancholy overtake him. The futility of all this!

Then it quickly passed, and he lifted the gill-thing by its arms, till he could get a grip on the body. Then he bent down on one knee, folded the body over himself, and lifted the gill-thing onto his back in a fireman's carry. He stooped, with difficulty, to retrieve the rifle, and started off, up the beach, and back toward the three small, grouped huts that were the lab and his home.

On his back, out of his sight, as he walked, the face of the gill-thing—torn and dripping—was slowly remolding itself.

There could be no doubt. The gill-thing would remain unconscious a good long while, so Bailey tied its hands behind it, to the straight back of a chair bolted to the floor.

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Then the weariness came again. Perhaps it had been building since the spondle dropped, perhaps it was from overwork and not enough rest, perhaps it was mental fatigue, but whatever it was, Bailey Stone fell across his army cot, and in a matter of moments was asleep.

The gill-thing sat slumped in the chair, its face pointed toward the floor while its head rested on its chest. For an hour and forty minutes, the flesh of the yellow thing merged. It melted with itself, flowing together, stripping the long streamers of flayed skin back in place. The seams of the face knitted, the holes smoothed over. Like pouring glue in a crevice, the face healed and ran together, and in an hour and forty minutes, the gill-thing was whole once more. No sign of the vicious beating it had taken was visible.

An hour and forty-six minutes after Bailey Stone had tied the gill-thing in the chair, it woke up.

For quite a long time it sat there, its slash mouth working fitfully. Opening wide as a fish's mouth opens wide, then snapping tight-shut, then opening again, as though trying to loosen some soundless scream. The thing's face was a contorted battlefield of emotion, nameless emotional searchings, for it seemed to be calling, calling, calling, and yet it could not.

Finally, it realized calling could do no good, for it ceased the activity. Then—calmly—it snapped the ropes binding it, and lifted Bailey Stone's sleeping, unresisting body to its massive shoulders. The walk to the beach was a short one.

Bailey woke at the first shock of cold water. He tried to twist and squirm, but he was held tightly in the lock of the thing's arms. He turned his head, saw the pinioning feet kicking out regularly, saw the white froth churned up by their motion. Then he turned his head back toward the horizon, and the pale, wan wafer that was the moon. And the glowing, yellow line of the spondle.

The thing was swimming him into the sure death of the yellow spondle!

"No! No, you've got . . . to . . . let . . . me . . . *go!*" he struggled with the thing, but slumped back in the being's grasp, knowing it was no use.

Strangely, the gill-thing kept the man's head above water, as though sensing he would drown should he go under. And yet it swam steadily

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toward the even surer death of the enveloping spondle.

They neared the half-mile barrier.

Bailey got his first look at the spondle close up.

It was a sticky, gelatinous mass, as he had suspected, and it was shining, like the smooth surface of a bubble. Its light came from deep within it, and at the edges, where it pressed against the invisible barrier, it seemed to be puckering. Puckering, as though sucking, and striving, and trying to move, and eat, but held back, and marking time in its hunger.

Bailey shivered, and beat frantically at the gill-thing.

It was no use. With a terrific surge, the gill-thing skimmed across the final few feet of water, and plunged into the mass of yellow spondle. The being swam a few feet, kicked its legs powerfully, and surfaced-under carrying the screaming, struggling Bailey Stone with him.

Down, and down, and down till there was no down and no up and the whirling, swirling of the yellow mass was a spinning eternity enveloping him, eating away at his body till the yellow was smoothed over by the shining and glossy black of the ebony unconsciousness—that finally had come. . . .

It was a room that was not a room. Bailey Stone looked up and saw the shifting pattern of many colors on the ceiling. The ceiling seemed to be made of some elastic substance, pulled into a baffle-chain set. It was a many-holed thing with each hole a square of the same size. It wavered and swam out of proportion, even as he watched, and he turned his head. The walls were doing the same thing.

It was like the strange mirrors at the fun house, that warped everything down till they looked thin and taffy-pulled at one end, bunchy and squat at the other. It was an odd effect, but somehow one that didn't disturb him.

His head ached, and he reached up to touch his skull. His hand passed before his face, and he dragged it back unbelievingly, to stare at it. His hand was thin and emaciated and yellow. It ended in five silken tentacles, webbed between.

He felt his face.

No nose.

His eyes were pocketed by gills.

There was a sharp, horny, spine crest that ran back to the small of his neck.

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His mouth was a slash.

He knew immediately, of course, and felt his stomach tighten. He tried to sit up, and found he couldn't. He tried to sit up and found three wide, fabric belts held him strapped to an oddly-designed table affair.

He tried to sit up, and the other gill-thing's face swam in sight. He saw it as through a film of yellowness, as though the other were behind a silken curtain. A voice spoke in his head:

Is it painful, Bailey?

There were moments of confusion and terror as the sounds rebounded inside his skull, and then he heard himself answer, non-vocally, *No, just a dull ache in my head.*

Then he added, *What . . . what's happened? Am I dead?*

The gill-thing laughed, and the sound tinkled to him through his brain, not through the air—if there *was* air here. He was certain he was in the spondle, somewhere. But just where, and who this was, and what had happened to him, and why he *wasn't* dead, and what would happen to him, were all questions he wanted answered, but could not ask.

They'll all be answered soon, Bailey.

I didn't say anything.

Have either of us since you woke up? The tinkling laughter again, inside his head, like feathers tickling the inside of his brain.

Where . . . ? He couldn't finish the sentence.

You are in City. What was called Miami Beach before the spondle. City stretched entirely across what was North America, Central and South America, and Canada. There are three other Cities; they're called Home, Place and Coldtown. In addition, there's the Deep, which we've set up in the Cayman Trench.

It only took us ten generations to get the Deep in shape.

Bailey listened, and his mind, working at top-notch efficiency, didn't seem able to grasp what the being was telling him. Cities under the spondle. Cities in the bottom of the ocean, in the Cayman Trench? Life beneath this yellow horror?

It will all be explained soon, Bailey.

Who are you? How do you know my name?

I'm Maynal, great-great-grandson of August Sandor. I was assigned by the Coordinators to bring you to us. We've known about you for several generations, but we've also been too busy reconstructing and preparing for

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the Visit to get to your island. We now are ready for your help. We hope you'll give it.

Bailey's mind boggled before these facts. August Sandor's great-great grandson? It was unbelievable! And in that form. It abruptly reminded him he, too, was in that shape. And he wanted to scream. It started to bubble up in his throat, but he forced it back.

Wh-what's happened to my body?

Just the Change, that's all. It happens to pre-spondle men taken down for the first time. All of the Coordinators were like yourself before they were spondled and Changed.

What are you going to do with me?

That is not my place to say. I'm to take you to the Coordinators. Just remember, you aren't in any danger. We need your help, you're one of us now.

Even though I shot at you?

You never shot at me.

But I did! I—

You shot at my father, Lesjen. By the time he got back to report, he was too old to return, and it took them a full generation to train a new mission-agent. Myself.

But . . .

Come. We mustn't waste any more time. I haven't much time left before I stet, and they send me to Coldtown or the Deep.

He passed his webbed hand over the ends of the three fabric straps that secured Bailey to the table, and the straps came loose and contracted like rubber bands, into cubicles on the opposite side of the table affair.

Bailey sat up, and Maynal helped him down.

Then the baffles contracted and expanded, and they stepped through and out. They were in a huge hall, that stretched as far as Bailey could see, into a yellow and multi-colored distance.

Your eyes have yet to grow acclimated, entirely, Maynal said, and then he stepped. He stepped quickly, and Bailey saw him there, then not-there. One step and he was gone.

Then Maynal reappeared. *Come on, I had to come back for you.* He took Bailey by the hand, and they both stepped.

They were there in four steps. They were in the Coordinators Hall in four steps.

Bodily action had been speeded up fantastically.

The Coordinators were all the same man. Each gill-thing looked precisely like the others.

When you are better adjusted, Bailey, you will see that

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we are each as different as humans were . . . and we look as superficially alike as humans did. One Coordinator had spoken.

Please, Bailey Stone pleaded, *please tell me what this is all about. What's happened? Who are you? How did this—this world beneath the spondle come about?*

The Coordinators took turns telling him the entire story, precisely what had happened, and what they had finally concluded. *We have had five hundred years in which to conclude these things, Bailey Stone . . . enhanced by the speeded-up activity of our brains. We are certain what we have said is true.*

But . . . but five hundred years?

Yes, what seemed to you but a few months, has been five hundred years to us here in the spondle.

Bailey ran what they had said through his mind, turning it over, knowing they were reading his thoughts. But he knew what they had said was true.

The ship that had slipped in and out of Earth's atmosphere was a robot ship, sent by some alien race as a scout, to "soften" up all worlds they might want to conquer. Who this race was, or what they looked like, no guess could be made, but they used the spondle as a foolproof war weapon, to envelop a planet, and kill off its inhabitants. They probably had a method for drawing the spondle off, later, with all the inhabitants, plants, life of any sort, reduced to its components, and harmless. It was a weapon that was successful because nothing could stop it. But something had happened this time.

Whether they had ever tried it with Earth-type humans before, or whether it was something in the atmosphere, the spondle had not worked precisely as it should have. Instead of swallowing up the Earth and its people, it had swallowed the Earth and *converted* its peoples.

It had changed them, in a matter of a few generations, and the Earthmen had accommodated themselves to living in the spondle. They had not died, but had mutated. They were now gill-things, with a complete social framework, based upon their accelerated metabolism, and the newly-acquired shortness of the life-span.

Now a gill-thing lived a full life in what would be three days to a normal, before-spondle Earthman. But there was no death. When their life-span

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had ended, they went into a state of suspension, until they were revived.

Those who had suspended—or gone into *stet*—were put in a shelter-creche in the Deep or Coldtown, which covered Antarctica. They were being saved for the Visit—the big showdown.

For the gill-people who had been Earthmen knew that one day the aliens who had sent that robot-ship, sent the spondle, would return, and try to drag off the blanket of spondle.

That would undoubtedly kill off the gill-people, and allow the aliens to take over the planet. Earth had been given a reprieve, and in many ways had benefited, but the aliens had to be stopped.

New cities had been constructed, and the same Coordinators who had proved themselves wise rulers were revived over and over and over after each *stet*, so they could resume their duties without being stored.

Earth had learned to live with itself, during the last five hundred years, and now all efforts were turned toward the visit of the aliens. The Visit. When they would swoop down as conquerors, and think they had another yellow-blanketed world to merely remove the spondle, and inhabit.

But their own battle weapon had betrayed them. It had acted differently on the Earthman's metabolisms, and instead of a dead planet, the aliens would return to find a race that had totally adapted itself.

A race that had accommodated itself in this strange battle.

The battle garb was different, but the Earthmen were there, prepared to fight.

All this, Bailey Stone warped through his mind, while the Coordinators named Eisenhower and Stevenson and Churchill and Schweitzer and Chiang Kai-shek and Russell and Toynbee and the others watched. He watched them . . . men who had lived five hundred years, who had lived as Earthmen and as gill-people. As Earthmen and as Earthmen-plus!

We need your mind, Bailey Stone, for your island was the only exempted area when the spondle overwhelmed the planet. We have deduced, from what August Sandor and his friends told us, what they passed down to their children, that on that Key, something happened that created a force barrier.

We need that barrier, Bai-

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ley Stone, and you may hold the missing piece to the energy-stream puzzle that has stopped us for many years. Will you help us? Will you forgive us for FORCING THE Change on you so abruptly?

Bailey Stone, the gill-thing that had been Bailey Stone, turned it over and over in his mind.

There wasn't really any problem. He knew the answer he would gladly give. He knew it was more than just stopping the aliens who had killed and given new life to his world.

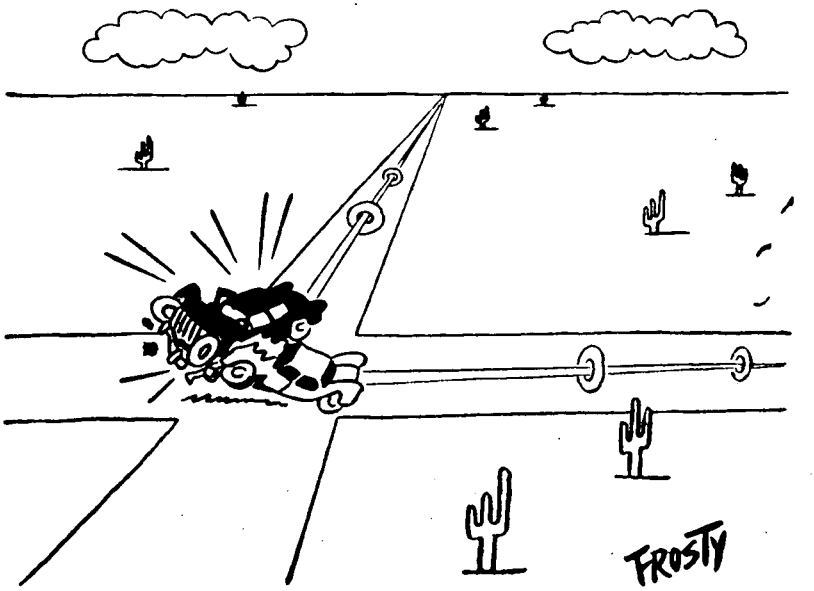
He knew it was working with the problem again, with men of his kind. The loneliness was at an end.

He looked up at the rows of Coordinators, and thought almost joyfully, *What was that phrase about the best of all possible worlds?*

They smiled, and Bailey Stone added:

When they get here, those aliens are going to be surprised. Which way is the lab?

THE END



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THE MOST THRILLING

SCIENCE FICTION

EVER TOLD

• CHAD OLIVER	The Space Horde
• P.F. COSTELLO	The Breeder
• HENRY SLESAR	The Eleventh Plague
• JACK SHARKEY	Minor Detail
• O.H. LESLIE	The Seven Eyes of Captain Dark
• ROG PHILLIPS	Prophecy, Inc.
• RICHARD GREER	The Secret of the Sham
• ELLIS HART	March of the Yellow Death

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